

Love, Lies, and Loss:
Young Women's Experiences of Abortion in China

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy

in

Gender Studies

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August 2008

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Abstract

Love, Lies, and Loss: Young Women's Experiences of Abortion in China

Submitted by WANG Yajun

for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Gender Studies

at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in August 2008

This study seeks to broaden and deepen our understanding of young women's abortion experiences in contemporary China. In many societies, abortion involves high controversy and serious moral implications. In China, however, it is a much less socially and culturally condemned issue. Moreover, the implementation of family planning policy has made abortion a widely available and accessible service. This has benefited unmarried pregnant women, for illegitimate birth remains a taboo. How do unmarried women experience abortion in China? The clinical experience of abortion is not the emphasis of this study because the women didn't emphasize it in their reflections. Instead, their major concerns are how abortion affects their romantic relationship, their family, their health, and their future happiness as a woman. Abortion was something they did for all these reasons, and something some women do for the same reasons again and again.

The study starts from the premise that choices are always contextual, and the analytical challenge therefore lies in tracing out the social conditions that produce and enable specific modes of acting. Based on interviews and observations, this research considers the factors that shape and condition women's abortion experiences. I argue that the loves, lies, and losses evoked by their experiences of abortion reveal the ways in which women experience gender and seek self-fulfillment in today's China.

論文撮要

愛上他，騙了她，想念它
——中國城市未婚女性墮胎經歷調查

王雅雋

本研究旨在擴大和加深我們對當代中國年輕女性的墮胎經歷的了解。在許多社會，墮胎是一個極具爭議的道德問題，亦不是容易獲得的醫療服務。然而在中國，由於不同的文化歷史背景，尤其是計劃生育政策的推行，使得已婚女性在墮胎這個問題上所承受的社會及道德壓力要遠低於其他國家，墮胎手術更是輕易可得，這也為另一群人帶來了方便——近年在一些城市，未婚女性的墮胎問題正開始受到社會關注。她們是如何經歷墮胎的？筆者通過深入訪談，發現墮胎的身體經驗並不是這些女性敘述的重點，而戀愛、家庭、健康、以及作為一個女人的未來幸福才是她們所深切考量的議題。墮胎，是她們為了這些考慮所必須採取的，甚至于不惜一次又一次重複採取的行為。

任何選擇都是由其特定情境所促成的，而分析的重點應該是產生這種行為模式的社會環境因素。本著這樣一個前提，筆者通過訪談和觀察來了解是甚麼形成了未婚女性對於墮胎的選擇和經歷。筆者認為，在糾結了愛情、謊言、和迷失的墮胎經歷背後，是中國女性在當代社會對自己性別角色的感觸和對自我價值實現的追求。

Acknowledgments

I would not have survived graduate school without these people.

Prof. Graeme Lang has given me generous help from the time I found his email address on the website of City University of Hong Kong. He became a friend and mentor as time passed. Our monthly chats at Pacific Café have been a great pleasure for me. His encouragement and sense of humor soothed me whenever I became impatient about writing.

Prof. Gordon Mathews introduced me into the fascinating world of anthropology. I loved and feared his classes. I loved them because it's the most interesting thing in the world to listen to and learn from an intelligent professor. I feared them because I never felt fully prepared for his class. I'm also grateful to Prof. Joseph Bosco and Dr. Danning Wang from the Anthropology Department of CUHK. My classmates, Lydia, Maggie, and Lena, kept me emotionally and intellectually close to Anthropology.

My teachers and classmates from Gender Studies program were very kind to me, although I was not very keen to be a gender person academically. The genuine friendship of Ms. Snowy Lai, the program secretary, was more than I could hope for. I would also like to thank the people from the Department of Japanese Studies, where I had a cubicle in general office and had been given a friendly reception by everyone. My *senpais*: Alana, Candy, and Cho-san had helped me on my thesis from proposal to end product. My longtime friend Liu Xiaozhuo generously offered his labor to deliver library books for me so that I had read more than two hundred books during the two years without breaking a sweat.

My deepest gratitude goes to Prof. Lynne Nakano, my supervisor. It's beyond me why she tolerated a student like me: I was not interested or helpful in her field, I was constantly changing my research topic in the first year, and I even seriously planned to quit school because of personal affairs. However, when all those dramas happened to me, she waited patiently for me to figure out things myself.

As the first person that led me into the academic world, Nakano sensei never told me what to do but she taught me how to do. I have learned that even though I flittered on topics, I needed to do research on the literature and write proposals. I have learned that a task is a task, and a deadline is a deadline. Sensei is the most

amiable person I have ever met, but from her I've learned to stop crying and be a responsible adult.

Sensei is also the person that asked me to hang on when I wanted to quit graduate school, but asked me to think twice when I wanted to immediately go on for a PhD. She encourages me not to agree with her, but to find my own answers. For all these important lessons I've learned from her, I insist addressing her "sensei" although I don't speak Japanese well.

I thank my parents for their unconditional love and support. Every time they visit me in Hong Kong they bring me a suitcase of grocery and home cooking to save my time for "more important things." Every time they drive me to the train station in Guangzhou they ask me to take care of myself and not to work too hard. I only wish they could love me less, and be less devoted to me so that I won't feel guilty when I don't live up to their expectation.

Finally, this research project would not have come true without my informants, who I met on the Internet and in person. They shared their life stories and candid opinions with me. They trusted me and confided their most private experiences to me. In Dongguan I was invited to their homes to have meals with them and play with their children. Despite all the hardship I experienced in this research, to tell their stories is my ultimate motivation. I devote this thesis to them.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Induced abortion has been widely available as a supplement for contraception in China¹ since the late 1970s when the one-child family planning policy² was implemented. In almost all Chinese hospitals, induced abortion is called “family-planning operation.”

For married women to terminate an unplanned pregnancy, not only is their abortion fee paid by the state, but also their abortion is regarded as complying with the national policy. Although unmarried women are not entitled these compensations, they are not barred from the easily accessible abortion service. On May 19, 2007, New York Times published an article: *Today's Face of Abortion in China Is a Young Unmarried Woman* to discuss the phenomenon that more and more single women including teenagers are having abortions in China. In fact, it's hard to tell the trend of this change from statistics, because information on marriage status is not required in the hospital, and hospitals are not the only places women seek abortions. Nevertheless, according to the medical staff I interviewed in Guangzhou, they observed that unmarried women have started to outnumber married women in abortion cases in big cities since the late 1990s.³

This study seeks to broaden and deepen our understanding of young women's experiences of abortion in contemporary China. By crystallizing the themes of love,

¹ In this research I use “China” to represent mainland People's Republic of China. I am aware that the Chinese society is not limited in this narrow geographic and political boundary. My findings of this research are only applicable in the context of mainland China (which means Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Overseas Chinese societies are excluded). And the term “Chinese” I use in this research mainly refers to the Han Chinese that takes up the majority of the population.

² As population control came to be viewed by the post-Mao leadership as a prerequisite for economic development and modernization, the one-child family policy was formulated in 1978-79. China's one-child family policy, which dictates that each family may give birth to only one child, has never been nationally codified, but is enforced as a “basic national policy.” The one-child policy is also called family planning policy. By “family planning”, it literally means every couple needs to apply for a birth permit before their baby is born. (Milwertz 1997) Without the birth permit, the baby will be an illegitimate birth on paper even if the couple is properly married and the baby is a first-born.

³ Several factors may have contributed to this trend. After two decades of strict implementation and effective propaganda of the policy, the idea of birth planning has been generally accepted by the public. Women are expected to have an IUD inserted about three to six months following the birth of their child. IUD is a relatively reliable contraceptive method and doesn't easily fail. More importantly, one influence of China's opening to the world from the 1980s is that more and more people start to agree that women have freedom to make decisions regarding sexual experience. In many people's eyes, such freedom implies a sense of modernity and cosmopolitanism. Premarital sex is not uncommon among young Chinese today, however, inadequate sex education poorly prepares people for safe sex. In a society in which taboos against single women bearing children persist, an unmarried, pregnant woman faces enormous social stigma that often renders her few options beyond an abortion.

lies, and loss, I investigate single women's abortion experiences from three main perspectives: their romantic relationship, their family, and their attachment to the fetus. I take a close look at how single women react to unexpected pregnancy, a situation in which they are structurally and ideologically disadvantaged through negotiation with the meaning of abortion. Furthermore, this is a study as much about love and gender as abortion. From the reflections of their experiences of abortion, I explore young women's sexuality in today's China.

I argue that when young women are trapped by the stigma of premarital pregnancy, they avoid the oppression on their sexuality not by resisting the discrimination of a sexual stigma but by graduating from an abortion. They choose to endure, conceal, and transform the abortion experience in the aim of achieving a gendered version of personal success, among which a happy marriage is a key element, and eventually, of maintaining their sense of human dignity.

Although the subject of this study is young women in Guangzhou, I also include a small study on peasant workers in Dongguan, a fast-industrializing city in South China. The informants are migrant workers from rural backgrounds. Due to application of a different research method (which I will explain in the methodology part of this chapter), my rural informants⁴ didn't resort to abortion but married the man and had baby as a solution of their pre-marital pregnancy. Their stories shed light on our understanding of urban women's decision on abortion. Therefore I present a chapter to discuss the rural women's experiences.

The experience of pregnancy for unmarried women in this research makes explicit the contradiction between (A) dominant discourses of romantic love with its assumption that women have freedom to make decisions regarding sexual experience and (B) the expectation that women bear responsibility for the results of sexual experience. I argue that when women realized this contradiction, they negotiated the structural and ideological oppression through a gendered version of personal success. Young Chinese women showed little interest in the western feminist vision of

⁴ Although the informants I interviewed in Dongguan are peasant workers (also called "migrant workers") in the factories in an industrialized city, it doesn't transform them into urban people. Therefore I use term them "rural" to distinguish from the urban informants. The informants I interviewed in Guangzhou claimed that they were registered Guangzhou citizens, city born and city bred.

equality between men and women – what they seek is happiness and success, not liberation per se.⁵

Happiness and success are not abstract concepts in today's China. Motivated by a fast-growing economy and stabilized society, personal achievements are measured by one's education, income, and marriage. For an urban woman, a happy successful life means to achieve educational success and find a well-paid job in her early twenties, get married at about 25, and have a child before 30. The timing is critical and the sequence is irreversible.⁶ For the women in this study, an unexpected pregnancy abruptly set them off the track of fulfilling these tasks. Therefore, abortion was something they did to continue to pursue their goal of a happy and successful life, and something some women do for the same reason again and again.

The urban women's ideal of a happy successful life does not fit the peasant workers' life reality. Peasant workers' major concerns are to marry an honest man and to achieve economic well-being as a family. In general women from rural backgrounds have acquired much less education and their expectations are lower than that of urban women. Their backgrounds also prevent them from being offered many opportunities in life. This is exactly why they are much less likely to terminate an ill-timed pregnancy as long as the man is cooperative. In addition, I find that when women (both urban and rural) are frustrated in pursuing the ideal happy and successful life, they tend to blame their fate of being a woman. It often impressed them that their female body is what disadvantages them in a society of contradicting norms.

Why Unmarried Women?

Premarital sex has only recently become accepted by more and more people in China. The widespread double standard toward sexual behavior in which a man does "a good job" if he has sex while a woman becomes a "slut", is firmly rooted in Chinese culture. The "sexual revolution" that started in the West from the 1960s but

⁵ Vanessa Fong has similar findings in her study of singleton daughters born under the one-child policy in China. (Fong 2004)

⁶ Men are not as pressured by the timing because they don't need to worry about marriage and childbirth in their twenties. However, during their twenties, marriage and childbirth are major concerns for women.

wasn't imported to China until the 1980s,⁷ has convinced more and more people that women have freedom to make decisions regarding sexual experience. However, the society is not yet ready to recognize young people's sexuality and to provide them with necessary sex education. Information about sex comes from many channels but rarely from family and school. While the Chinese government has focused on policing the reproductive lives of married women, it has paid far less attention to educating single women about sex. Many of them lack even a basic understanding about reproductive health and contraception. Having grown up in a China increasingly unmoored from the values and inhibitions of traditional culture, more single women are having sex, despite often knowing little about it. They also are having more abortions. Therefore, young Chinese women often encounter disillusion, confusion, and hurt in their premarital sexual experiences. The freedom they think they have is the "freedom to" engage in sex, but not the "freedom from" all the sexual and emotional fuss and muss implied in this engagement.⁸ The repressive gender norms and the lack of social support make them doubt that a woman can truly and fully enjoy freedom regarding sexuality.

I choose unmarried women to be my research subjects due to three reasons. Firstly, compared to unmarried women in other societies that are also stigmatized by premarital pregnancy, Chinese women have the easiest access to abortion. As a supplement to the national family-planning policy, abortion service is widely available across the country. Induced abortion in China is officially called, "family-planning operation" by government and medical staff. No matter where she lives in China, a woman can walk into any hospital or clinic for an abortion without disclosing her identity. There are many ways to abort a fetus: by pill, by operation, at home, or at the hospital. To quote from a medical school textbook, modern medical techniques have made abortion "more and more perfect, convenient, safe, and painless" (Nie 2002: 28). What's more, hospitals and clinics are not always the first places people resort to. For some extremely shy women, back-alley drugstores and the Internet have made DIY abortions possible. As an experienced woman suggests on the Internet, "Try the pills at home, if you don't stop bleeding after several days, go to the hospital."

⁷ China launched its Economic Reform and Open-Door Policy since 1979. It was then that the country re-opened to the material goods and ideas from the outside world.

⁸ Levine distinguishes "freedom to" and "freedom from" in her discussion of teenage sex and sex education. (2002: 108)

The second reason why I chose to study the unmarried women is that their resources to solve the problem are very limited. Although the Chinese government pays for married women's abortion fees, it doesn't pay for unmarried women. Organizational help is nonexistent in most places. During my fieldwork in Guangzhou, I made phone calls to many organizations such as Women's Union, Young Volunteers, and The Youth league. None of these organizations offer help to unmarried pregnant women, nor could they provide any alternative source for me to discover. Some cities, such as Harbin, opened hotlines to help pregnant adolescents, but the staff always persuades the girl to tell her parents. Such hotlines, regardless of the actual help it can offer, do not cover women over 18 years old. The cost for an abortion ranges from about RMB 100 to 8,000, depending on how and where it is done. In most cases, an abortion costs between 1,000 and 2,000 which is not a small amount for an average young woman. Young unmarried women are left on their own to solve the pregnancy issue. Therefore, who pays for the abortion, where do these women get help, and how do they do the "damage control" are all important aspects to examine.

The third reason I study unmarried women is that they have more decision-making power than married women in China regarding an unplanned pregnancy. This may sound strange: how can an unmarried woman have more power over reproductive decisions than a married woman? I think she does. For a married woman, if she violates the family-planning policy, she will face a series of consequences, such as heavy fines and the possible loss of her job. Her decision making process is rational and she can always blame the state if she likes, leaving other people innocent. However, an unmarried woman is left with the thought that "if I get married I can have the baby," so the meaning of her abortion is more complicated and she has a much bigger space to construct its meaning. In other words, a married woman's unplanned pregnancy is rejected by a strong national policy, leaving little space for her to negotiate; while an unmarried woman's unplanned pregnancy is rejected by many soft powers⁹, leaving a lot of space for her to negotiate. Therefore, I am interested in looking at how she negotiates with the soft powers involved in her abortion experience.

⁹ Compared to the strict birth control policy, which is rigid and written in paper, the social norms, as well as the attitudes from a woman's significant others such as her family and boyfriend, can be seen as the soft powers that influence a woman's decision on an unexpected pregnancy.

In sum, the reasons for me to choose unmarried women as my subjects are the wide availability and high sensitivity of abortion; the limited sources available for them to deal with abortion; and the fact that abortions often force women to negotiate with their social relationships.

The informants for this research consist of 15 women with abortion experiences. They are either local residents of Guangzhou or studying in Guangzhou. All of them claim to be from an urban background. Their educational levels are above high school. Most of them are in their late teens and early twenties at the time of interview. Their first abortions also happened in their late teens or early twenties, which were during their university or when they just started to work.¹⁰ These women include university students, office workers,¹¹ and those who are unemployed and supported by their family or boyfriend. They own personal computers and are able to afford university or unemployment; however, more than half of them reported that they were not economically independent when they first had abortions. The class situation in Guangzhou is in flux and thus difficult to categorize my informants' classes. I cannot claim to know well about all areas of Guangzhou's socioeconomic pyramid, let alone that of China's. I can only make an estimation that these women are not among the youth from the narrow, extremely elite top or the wide, impoverished, rural bottom of that pyramid. I seldom heard that they thought they had no possible chance of upward mobility, while I always heard that how much they admired me being a graduate student studying in Hong Kong.

10 people (men and women) without abortion experiences and 3 medical staff offered their opinions for this research. 15 of them received university education or higher. Their views are not necessarily in any way representative of the majority Chinese. However, I have come to understand much about the notion of the Chinese society from talking to them, and by exploring how they view women with abortion experiences. Furthermore, their views shed light on the larger social and cultural environment that affects the young women's experiences.

¹⁰ Three informants had their first abortions in high school. They are also younger than the other women informants in this research.

¹¹ The informants with full-time jobs I interviewed claimed that they work in office; however, working as white-collar workers doesn't necessarily mean their jobs are well-paid and desirable (according to my informants' complaints). One of the informants is a restaurant waitress.

Besides the 28 informants from Guangzhou, I also include 14 rural informants from Dongguan in this research. I will discuss them in the methodology part of this chapter as well as in Chapter 5.

Location: Guangzhou

I believe that my research can be conducted in any big city in China. The common characteristics among these cities regarding abortion service are as follows: first, abortion (by pill or surgery) is a simple and safe medical service. Its price, technology, and service do not vary drastically between cities as long as it is performed by authorized personnel. The differences between a public hospital and a privately-owned clinic in the same city can be bigger than between two public hospitals in different cities. Second, since hospitals and clinics do not require identity information for abortion patients, it will be almost impossible for me to do statistical research on premarital abortion. Neither can I trust such data in reflecting local reality, because to my knowledge the sensitivity of this issue often drives women to have abortions in other cities other than their hometown as long as they can afford such a trip. Third, the fact that abortion has never been publicly discussed in Chinese society makes it an extremely personal issue, particularly for unmarried women. Therefore, an unmarried pregnant woman faces the same conflict and isolation no matter whether she lives in Beijing or in Guangzhou. The reason I choose Guangzhou to conduct my research is mainly because my family and friends in Guangzhou provided me with easy access to various places such as hospitals and universities.

Guangzhou is the provincial capital of Guangdong Province. It has a population of over 9 million, making it the most populous city in the province as well as the third most populous metropolitan area in mainland China. Guangzhou is also the economic center of the Pearl River Delta and is the heart of one of China's leading commercial and manufacturing regions. Statistics showed that the city's economy grew at an average yearly rate of 13.82 percent from 2001 to 2005 and its GDP in 2005 hit 545.12 billion yuan.¹² Guangzhou has been enjoying a soaring

¹² Guangzhou's economy continued to grow. According to the mayor Zhang Guangning at a press conference, "Guangzhou's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006 is estimated to exceed 600 billion yuan (US\$77 billion), up more than 10 percent growth than in 2005. (*Guangzhou Daily*: December 20, 2006)"

economy for the past two decades. Like those in the rest of China, if not more so, people in Guangzhou greatly value personal economical success.

The standard of living in Guangzhou is above average in China. The unemployment rate has been maintained below 3% for the past ten years and 99.68% of school-age children are enrolled in primary schools according to an official review in 2005 (*"Guangdong 2005 – The Year in Review"*).¹³ The computer is a common commodity for the average family as well as for most university students. The prevalent usage of computers enabled me to conduct interviews with my informants through the Internet. In Guangzhou, personal achievement is highly valued in respect of education, career, and income. For instance, it's popular for rich families to send their children abroad for further education.

Guangzhou is also called "the Southern Gate of China." Being a coastal city geographically close to Shenzhen and Hong Kong, Guangzhou is among the first Chinese cities to be exposed to new things, opportunities and challenges – including new policies from the central government or exotic goods and ideas from outside of China. Like Shenzhen, Guangzhou is in the area of "the frontline of reform and opening (改革開放的前沿 *gaigekaifang de qianyan*)".¹⁴ It has attracted a considerable number of migrants from all over China since the 1980s while maintaining local Cantonese culture and dialect.

Guangzhou is the epitome of a rapidly changing China. This is also reflected in the case of people's sexuality. According to the medical staff I interviewed, they observed that since the late 1990s, the abortion rate routinely raises in September every year, which is the first school month after summer vacation. Local newspapers report it as, "the September Abortion Tide (九月墮胎潮 *jiuyue duotaichao*)" (*Guangzhou Daily*: April 5, 2004). Privately-owned hospitals and clinics flourish in Guangzhou just like other private-owned businesses do in the region since late 1980s. One of the private-owned hospitals I visited offers "student discount" for university students to have abortions.

¹³ Although the statistics are addressing Guangdong province as a whole, Guangzhou, as the provincial capital, is leading in most aspects such as education and social security.

¹⁴ This is a metaphor that's widely used in China to describe the first areas that benefited from the economic reform and open-door policy.

Literature Review

Abortion in Different Societies

Throughout human history, abortion has been performed in every society for thousands of years, and was carefully kept in a grey and private area of morality. It is in recent history that abortion became debatable in the public arena. The abortion debate can be generalized into three questions:

Is abortion a woman's right?

When does human life begin?

Should we legislate morality? (Kreeft 1983)

The debate is particularly intense in the United States, where religion notably makes its mark on society and politics while the feminist movements also have greatly affected public views of abortion. Since the *Roe v. Wade* decision¹⁵, the abortion issue has polarized the society into two opposing camps: pro-choice and pro-life. Advocates of choice believe that abortion is a fundamental right for women. For the pro-life movement, on the other hand, abortion is equivalent to murder (Luker 1984, 1985). As the country entered the 1990s, battles over abortion were raging in all branches and at all levels of U.S. government (Goggin, 1993: 1). To paraphrase James Stimson, it is difficult to imagine an adult of child-rearing age who has not thought about abortion as a public issue (2004).

Compared to American and western European societies, other societies appear to be vaguer on this issue although they also have strong religious traditions. For example, in his study of the abortion issue in Kenya, Mexico and Poland, Kulczycki points out that these societies have high abortion rates in spite of their active and powerful churches. Such phenomena are also found in the wider regions of Eastern Europe, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, which reflects "the unmet need for family planning and the common recourse to abortion in the absence of contraception or in the event of contraceptive failure" (Kulczycki 1999: 3). In other words, ideological preference is not the only factor that shapes the way abortion is handled. These developing countries need to be concerned about the need for

¹⁵ In 1973, the United State Supreme Court reached its decision to decriminalize abortion, which made *Roe v. Wade* one of the most controversial and politically significant cases in U.S. Supreme Court history.

demographic control but don't want to openly challenge their churches. That's why the abortion debate is not brought to the public domain and unsafe abortions continue to occur underground.

In his study of abortion and Buddhism in Japan, LeFleur (1992) observes that Buddhists of Japan are less disruptive than religious leaders in western societies in handling abortion.¹⁶ The Japanese temples' practice of providing guilt-relieving rituals for persons who have had abortions shows the Japanese way of finding a solution to moral dilemmas. It shows "the Buddhist position that articulates a kind of societal pragmatism" (1992: 212). Such a position makes abortions "permissible but, at the same time, makes unnecessary any denial of strong emotions a woman might have about her fetus as a life and even as a child" (1992: 213). Therefore, as LeFleur concludes, the issue of abortion does not tear Japanese society apart; meanwhile a woman can acknowledge any feelings of bonding that have developed within herself without barring her from deciding to have an abortion.

As we see, religious traditions and the state's need for demographic control are all perspectives that influence the public views and mainstream discourses about abortion. Moreover, the example of Japanese Buddhists shows a pragmatic tradition surrounding abortion. According to Fine, "pragmatism argues that the value of an act is created through interaction and is judged by its outcome. Acts are not inherently good or evil, other than how groups define them, particularly in light of their consequences. (Hechter and Opp 2001: 142)" The mentality that assumes the abortion question might be solved by simplifying into a right-or-wrong question, and then fashioning law to fit that answer, which is widely applied in western societies, is not necessarily a favored approach for every society.

The above examples show that China is not the only society that has been permissive and remained silent over the abortion issue for the concern of demographic control, nor is it the only culture in the world that does not treat abortion as evil and sinful. The interesting thing is that many Chinese appear to be extraordinarily complacent about abortion, especially in the public sphere. In *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion*, Nie addresses this phenomenon and points out that silence doesn't mean voiceless. He contends that "the moral and

¹⁶ The fundamental premise in Buddhist belief that humans are tied to karmic cycles of birth and death, thus the aborted fetus can "return" can also be found in LaFleur's work on abortion and Buddhism in Japan. I will discuss this idea in detail in Chapter 4.

sociocultural dimensions of abortion in Chinese society are surrounded by unexamined assumptions, superficial observations, misunderstandings, and myths” (2005: 7). Nie’s work is so far the only ethnography of abortion in China; nevertheless, he only focused on the morality discussion of abortion. He is anxious to convince his western audience that Chinese people are moral: although the topic is rarely talked about in public, people are not unconcerned with it. My study is fundamentally different from Nie’s, not only because his informants are married women while mine are unmarried, but because the morality perspective is not my central concern. The central question of my study is: how do women negotiate a stigmatizing experience?

Rigdon reminds us that for a majority of aborting women, in China and in most countries of the world, abortion is part of the politics of survival. The issue at hand is rarely anything quite so clean or beautiful as the talk of a fundamental freedom or upright morality. After comparing abortion law and practice in China and the United States, Rigdon concludes that:

A comparison often made between Chinese and Americans is on the issue of a woman’s right to choose pregnancy and to control her reproductive system. The word “choice”¹⁷ is not very useful in such comparisons because in neither country do women have a choice about who will bear children, and in a very large number of abortion cases women are not choosing what they want. They are forced into the procedure by indigence, marital status, age, health problems, family demands, or, in the case of China, by state regulations as well. (Rigdon 1996: 555)

I agree with Rigdon that “choice” is not a very useful term regarding the issue of abortion. If we apply the rational choice theory to analyze a woman’s choice over reproduction, it seems to be a tautological explanation of their behavior and it provides little new information. As a matter of fact, it’s hard to trace from where a choice begins. If we assume that a woman is making a rational choice to have an

¹⁷ The term “choice” has been questioned by several scholars. For example, in her review of the history of reproductive politics in America, Solinger (2005) addresses the issue of a woman’s right to choose pregnancy and to control her reproductive system. She argues that as long as the state takes over the right to decide which women are legitimate mothers, it is always hard for women to feel they have choices over reproductive matters such as abortion.

abortion, how can we explain her choice of not using contraception in the first place? If she fails to make “a rational choice” on contraceptive use, can we jump to the conclusion that women are incapable of making rational choices at all? Therefore, I think it is greatly limiting if we simplified women’s reproductive behavior into individuals’ choices. In this study I try to avoid the intention to solve “the problem of abortion.” Rather, I understand abortion as a problematic situation for the women involved, and I’m interested in their negotiation with their situation in the context of Chinese society.

Meanwhile, I have reservations about Rigdon’s statement that “in a very large number of abortion cases women are not choosing what they want.” Most of the informants in this study reported that they volunteered to have the abortion, and that they could not afford to have the baby given the time and condition. It sounds strange that a woman would “want” to have an abortion. However, in my view, even if they say they are not choosing what they want, what they want is not the baby, or, not only the baby. In this research, we will see what women really want, and why the baby is not the central issue. I locate the reproductive behavior at the personal level¹⁸ to explore the complexity of the abortion issue.

Abortion: A Stigma

Abortion is a stigma in Chinese society. Although I have shown in previous sections that abortion is legal, widespread, and freely available in China, and that there are different perspectives regarding abortion around the world, I agree with Zoja that “without exception, abortion always and everywhere belongs to the sphere of taboo (1997: 14).” A woman cannot have an abortion without being aware that she is violating some publicly held norms. Even married women in China who have abortions to respond to the policy are reluctant to make it known to others. “It’s not something to be proud of,” a married woman commented to me.

For unmarried women, abortion is more than something “not to be proud of”; it’s something “to be ashamed of” because it implies a sexual stigma: premarital pregnancy. It also represents one’s poor judgment: ruining her future. Although

¹⁸ Petchesky (1984) concludes that reproductive behavior has two dimensions, a personal one and a social one. At the personal level, decisions about sexuality, contraception and abortion are individual ones, and depend on specific personal circumstances. These matters have a social dimension as well. Reproductive behavior is conditioned by social reality. In this research, I take the personal-level approach.

premarital sex is commonplace among young people in China today, single mothers are almost unseen in public. Social barriers and discrimination towards birth out of marriage remain tremendous.¹⁹

According to Goffman, a stigma can be possessed in two ways: *discredited* and *discreditable*. Discredited refers to those presume that their stigma is known about already or is immediately apparent to others (usually because it is visual in nature). In contrast, discreditable refers to those who believe that their stigma “is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them” (1963: 14). He further adds that stigmatized individuals are likely to have experience with both situations (1963: 14). Regarding the stigma of premarital pregnancy, a woman faces two choices: (A) an illegitimate birth as a discredited situation; (B) an abortion as a discreditable situation. In other words, an unexpected pregnancy creates an unremovable stigma. A woman can only decide whether to make her stigma visible or not. An abortion is only the start of her management of spoiled identity.

The premarital pregnancy is not the only stigma for a woman to deal with in the context of Chinese society. She needs to avoid representing a series of failures in the motivational schemes. Her family, who suffer a courtesy stigma²⁰ by her conduct, can cause a woman to feel shame and guilt for being an unfilial daughter. The other implications of deviance and possible stigmas for her to face are “a romantic-relationship fool,” “a life loser,” and “a cruel serial killer,” just to name a few. In this study, I will explore how women negotiate these problematic situations with various strategies.

Page concludes out that there are two main ways in which individuals tend to come to recognize that they possess a stigma: self-recognition and the reactions of others. Many individuals may come to recognize that they have a stigma by a combination of both (1984: 9-10). The process of recognition is part of an individual's negotiation of the concept of a stigma. I take the interactionist approach as I view abortion, like other social experiences, as enacted and reacted to variably. The task for the women involved is to reduce the problematic aspects of their situation and seek protecting and smoothing effects through interaction with others.

¹⁹ A recent article on New York Times, “Single mothers in China forge a difficult path”, gives three single mothers' stories in today's China. The three women report that they have to either lie to people about their marital status, or actually marry to a man in order to send their children to public schools. (French: April 6, 2008)

²⁰ According to Goffman, a courtesy stigma is acquired as a result of being related to a person with a stigma. (1963)

Their social participation and social relationships are of central concern in the meaning they construct for their abortion experiences (Zimmerman 1977: 6).

Page reviews Goffman's stigma categorization²¹ and points out that the blameless-blameworthy dimension is of importance for the study of the concept of stigma. He summarizes,

In general, those with physical or tribal stigma are granted a measure of social acceptance because they are not considered to be personally responsible for their "failing". Those with conduct stigmas, however, are generally considered to be personally responsible for their failings. It is commonly believed that such individuals have deliberately chosen to behave in socially unacceptable ways. As such, they are liable to be treated unfavorably by others. (1984: 6)

Abortion is a woman-only conduct stigma. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for women with abortion experiences to relieve the blame of their "laziness, stupidity, and reluctance" (Solinger)²² since accountable contraceptive methods became widely available. This is particular true in modern, economically developed areas, where young women who fall into unwanted pregnancy receive little sympathy from the society. Therefore, they hesitate to seek help for fear of blame. What's more, they tend to comply with the public view and consider themselves to be solely responsible for their failings. The women in this study resort to an abortion to correct a mistake and try to hide the experience from others. For them, the only and ultimate way to regain social acceptance is to not get side-tracked by this incident, and to become a successful woman according to the mainstream society's definition. That is, they hope to achieve school education, to have a career, to marry properly, and to have a happy family life. Despite her tendency to judge her life through such a standard and her commitment to live up to it, in some cases, women resort to a hymen repair to pass as a virgin to a biographical other, e.g. her new boyfriend or fiancé.

²¹ In his landmark book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman discusses "three grossly different" types of stigmas: (A) abominations of the body, (B) blemishes of individual character, (C) Tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion (1963: 14). Premarital pregnancy belongs to category B and is a stigma resulting from misconduct.

²² As Solinger observes in American society, "once the birth control pill was available, experts tended to blame all unintended pregnancies on women's 'laziness, stupidity and reluctance'" (2005: 170).

Page points out that “intentional passing or covering by the stigmatized precludes any effective challenge to existing social values and, as such, is likely to reinforce contemporary patterns of stigmatization” (1984: 23-24). At a social level, this is indeed the case. However, at the personal level, many women report that they cannot afford to challenge the existing social values at the sacrifice of their happiness.

To cover her abortion experience and pass is not without costs. To apply certain points of Goffman’s mode of analysis into the woman’s context: first, she must pay “a great psychological price, a very high level of anxiety, in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment” (1963:108-109). She is unsure about how people will react when they learn about her past abortion and she is constantly facing the risk of exposure. This is a particularly great concern when she starts a new romantic relationship. Secondly, she will feel “torn between two attachments” (1963:109). She suffers from feelings of disloyalty and self-contempt when she judges other women with similar experiences. Therefore, she may appear to be sympathetic and supportive to women of abortion experiences on the Internet, while in reality she never shows any relation to this group of women. Thirdly, she will have to “be alive to aspects of the social situation which others treat as uncalculated and unattended” (1963: 110). There are many triggers in everyday life to remind her of her shameful experience. These triggers may have no special meaning for the others, but for her, they can sometimes stimulate a very emotional moment, or even a collapse.

The Docile Female Body

In his highly influential theoretical works, Foucault regards the body as the primary site for the operation of modern forms of power. Through his work, the body came to be seen more generally as a metaphor for critical discussions which link power to knowledge, sexuality and subjectivity. Foucault argues that the outcome of disciplinary power is *the docile body*, a body “that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (1979: 136). According to Foucault, to understand how modern power operates requires: first, we must cease to imagine “power” as the possession of individuals or groups and instead as a dynamic or network of non-centralized forces. Second, we should recognize that these forces are not random or haphazard, but configure to assume particular historical forms. Thirdly, prevailing

forms of selfhood and subjectivity are maintained not through physical restraint and coercion, but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms.

Women's bodies in general have historically been indeed more vulnerable to extremes in both forms of cultural manipulation of the body. Body, subjectivity and agency are the three themes frequently considered and examined in women's bodily experiences. In the past four decades, an enormous amount of feminist research on the female body has been generated from a diversity of disciplines, theoretical perspectives and methodologies. These studies focus on how women experience their bodies, on how women's bodies are implicated in various social and cultural practices, and on symbolic representations of the female body. The history of women's bodies has been mapped in various areas of social life and attention had been devoted to how institutions and cultural discourses shape women's embodied experiences (Davis 1997: 5).

When we turn to consider some aspects of the history of medicine and fashion, we notice that the social manipulation of the female body has emerged as an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between the sexes over the last hundred years. Feminist scholars have explored women's experiences with the appearance of their bodies from beauty practices, fitness and fashion, to dieting, eating disorders, and plastic surgery. They find that ideas about women's bodies have centrally affected the structures within which women live. These ideas have played a dramatic role in either challenging or reinforcing power relationships between men and women, and can therefore be regarded as political tools in an ongoing political struggle. Rose Weitz argues that only by looking at the embodied experiences of women, as well as at how those experiences are socially constructed, can we fully understand women's lives, women's position in society, and the possibilities for resistance against that position (Weitz 2003: 10). The female body is the object of processes of domination and control as well as the site of women's subversive practices and struggles for self-determination and empowerment (Bordo 1993; Davis, 1995).

Judith Butler has been highly influential in breaking down the distinction between biological bodies and socially constructed gender difference. According to Butler, women are neither born, nor made; they appropriate the cultural prescriptions on sex. Clearly, the sketch of power and bodies that has been offered here is not one which would lend itself to an understanding of sexual difference in terms of

essentialism or biology. The female body cannot provide the ontological foundation required by those who assert an essential sexual difference. On the contrary, it is the construction of biological and social discourse as being able to provide this status that is in need of analysis (Price and Shildrick 1999: 231).

The theories regarding body, subjectivity and agency I have read inspire me to look at the abortion issue from the following aspects: First, how do women experience their female body through abortion? As her reproductive power realizes itself in pregnancy, a woman is reminded of her female body in a radical situation which her body cannot be a simple abstraction to be ignored. The pregnancy violently and abruptly tears her from the fantasy of equal opportunity and freedom between men and women. It is women that bear the consequence although the dominant discourse of romantic love assumes that every individual has freedom to make decisions regarding sexual experience. Moreover, such a consequence can ruin her future happiness as a woman if she fails to solve her pregnancy properly. Inequality founded on the female body becomes inescapable. It is a time when the woman has to attend to her actual material body and take action. What are the tensions the body evokes for her through the process from her pregnancy to abortion?

Second, from the discourse the women use to describe their abortion experiences, I will try to explore how women make sense of the lived experience of having a female body. Do they describe their existence in the terms used by dominant society?²³ If so, do they find these discourse acceptable and unquestionable or lamentable but not changeable facts of life? If not, what ideas do they produce as an alternative narrative other than the dominant ideology? Rather than simplifying a complex social reality, I try to show the pluralistic, multisided, and contested characteristics of this issue through women's own words and experiences.

Thirdly, throughout my discussion, it will be assumed that the body, far from being some fundamentally stable, constant to which we must contrast all culturally relative and institutional forms, is constantly "in the grip", as Foucault puts it, of cultural practices. Not that this is a matter of cultural repression of the instinctual or natural body. Rather, there is no "natural" body. Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture. Therefore, a woman's "choice" and

²³ The dominant discourse tends to describe women in passive ways, such as "women should protect themselves," "women should be more careful than men particularly over sexual matters," and "women should love and care more for themselves (implying that it's stupid to make too much sacrifice for others)."

experience of abortion can be viewed as much of a social and cultural construction. Is a body which has undergone abortion a “docile body” or not? What power is exercised and by whom?

In sum, women are often viewed as victims either of social pressure or of their own female bodies, and there is a tendency to look for forms of resistance. However, we should bear in mind that in any form of resistance, the women have very limited freedom on this issue. I believe that it is always more important a task for us to listen to her voice and understand her experience before we rush to draw any conclusion on whether her abortion is an act of accommodation or resistance.

In this study I try to explore the meaning and reality of abortion for women in China. Although I am willing to highlight the parts of female self-determination and self-actualization in the feminist theories on women’s bodily experiences and embodied practices, I am not too optimistic when it comes to abortion. I tend to be more alert to the domination and constraints imposed on women on this matter.

*The Wild Wild Love*²⁴

None of the informants in this research reported that they were pregnant because they were forced into sex. Some of them might have been pressured into engagement of sex to prove that “she truly loves him,” but all of the informants assured me that they did it in the name of love – at least in their first sexual and love relationship. Love was the most discussed theme during the interviews. It was always the man and the love before the sex and the abortion.

Therefore, I contribute the phenomenon of “Today’s Face of Abortion in China Is a Young Unmarried Woman” to the spread of ideals of romantic love. “Free love (自由戀愛 *ziyou lian'ai*)” was one of the most revolutionary social and

²⁴ My earlier introduction about young people’s common engagement in premarital sex and the convenient abortion facility in China may have impressed the readers that today’s Chinese society has a very open attitude towards sex. This is only partial truth: compared to the China’s past, yes; compared to other societies, not really. Take Chinese teenagers for example, one of the biggest concerns for their parents and school teachers is to prevent them from romantic love relationship, because it’s believed that once the students falls in love, they won’t have the mind to study and thus endangers their chances to exceed in the educational system. “早戀 *Zao Lian*,” premature romantic love, direct translation would be “early love” is a popular term addressing romantic love relationships in secondary school. I have asked many people the question of “How early is early for people to fall in love?” “Before college is early,” most of them answered me without hesitation. For those who didn’t make to high school, however, the definition of “*zao lian*” is not so clear-cut. Teenage girls who have boyfriends are considered naughty and disobedient. Single young women with abortion experiences are considered wild and bad.

ideological changes that happened in the second half of the last century. Before that, young people were forbidden to love whoever they wanted because their marriages were arranged and decided by parents. The first law of the People's Republic of China was established in 1950. And it was the marriage law to guard the freedom of marriage for both men and women. For the first time in the Chinese history, women actually had the legal right to divorce their husbands. Thirty years later, the one-child policy limited the size of Chinese family in a rigorous way, relieving women from the obligation of giving birth in a culture of multi-offspring preference. To quote Giddens, "such practice, seemingly an innocent demographic statistic, placed a finger on the historical trigger so far as sexuality was concerned. For the first time, for a mass population of women, sexuality could become separated from a chronic round of pregnancy and childbirth. (1992: 26)"

Within three generations, Chinese women have experienced changes from having no say on her love and marriage to having the freedom to engage in premarital sex.²⁵ What is noticeable is that the previous two revolutionary changes were generated from top-down. Women were entitled by a law and a national policy the right to marry the man they want and to have fewer children. They didn't initiate these changes themselves. For the social change that's happening now, women volunteered to engage into premarital sex. It is true that China has been greatly influenced by the western ideas after its open-door policy in 1979. However, the top authorities have never asked women to engage in premarital sex. And because more and more women are practicing sex before they get married, the society and men have come to understand this has become a reality, whether they like it or not. Falling in love with a wrong man and being pregnant at a wrong time, which happened in ancient Chinese love novels and operas, is now a drama that can happen to any ordinary woman in real life. To avoid the love tragedy that often consumes the heroine's life on the stage, today's women need either an abortion or a happy shotgun marriage. Many urban women choose abortion, because for them the definition of "wrong" is no longer only regard to marriage; it's been added new meanings.

²⁵ Take my family for example, my grandmother was born in 1921. She ran away from her family and joined the communist army to escape from a marriage her parents arranged for her. She had six children with my grandfather, which was an average family size in her time. My mother was born in 1956. She was the third child in her family. Dating was popular among the young people while premarital sex was a taboo in her time. I was born in 1984 and the only child in my family. The freedom I have regarding my sexuality as a woman has tremendously exceeded my mother's generation.

Fong studies urban daughters born under China's one-child policy and argues that they have benefited from the demographic pattern produced by the policy. They enjoy unprecedented parental support because they do not have to compete with brothers for parental investment. Because these daughters were born to low-fertility mothers, they tend to be socialized from childhood to value the educational and career success that the modern economy and the fertility transition enable them to pursue (2002). The majority of the urban informants in this research are only children.²⁶ They gave reasons like "I haven't finished school" or "I don't have enough money to get married and raise a child yet" to justify their decision on abortion. When they said so, they looked sad. They felt powerless as women.

What does abortion mean to a woman's perception of romantic love? And what does abortion mean to a woman's perception of self-identity? As Giddens suggests, the modern form of intimacy of love and sexuality has to be reviewed and transformed in a way with more "association with self-identity and personal autonomy" for both genders, in order to attain the "wholesale democratizing of the interpersonal domain, in a manner fully compatible with democracy in the public sphere" (1992: 1-3, 61-64). In the following chapters, I will explore the potentialities of such a transformation of abortion experience for women.

Methodology

Milwertz compares the process of collecting data in China to the process of attempting by bicycle to cross a rush-hour intersection in downtown Beijing: in principle everyone is well aware of the basic rule, however, in practice almost no one follows the rules. Therefore, in order to get through to the proposed target, both cyclist and scholar alike must swerve flexibly between various obstacles, regardless of whether the lights are red or green. She writes, "The tricky part is not to harm anyone in the process. (1997: xi)" I think she has grasped the key in doing anthropological research in China: maximum flexibility and creativity, but not without principle.

I conducted my research from March through August of 2007. Guangzhou and Dongguan are the two locations of my fieldwork. Before I discuss in detail the methodology I applied, I would like to make one point clear.

²⁶ Exceptions are because of their parents' second marriage or adoption.

In-depth interviews are the major source for my data collection in both places; however, in Guangzhou I carried out interviews with informants through the Internet while in Dongguan I did face-to-face interviews. This difference in the methodology I used reflects important differences between the informants and influences the data I collected. As I have mentioned, it is hard to categorize my urban informants' social classes; however, it is not hard to tell that they are generally in a socially advantaged status compared to my rural informants. None of the rural informants owned a personal computer. Even if they are able to type – which is not a commonly acquired skill among the peasant workers in Dongguan – they could not afford the time and leisure to surf the Internet regularly. Unlike the urban informants with whom I could conduct long interviews when they were using a computer at home or at work, the rural informants have to either work on the production line six days a week or take care of their children and do house chores in their rented apartments. They are at the same age of the urban informants, but their hands are tied up by factory work and house chores. It is not that peasant workers do not have abortions as a solution of premarital pregnancy – I saw their teary faces in hospitals and heard about their stories from people, but I could not find them to carry out interviews. They hide themselves carefully in the crowd, just like my urban informants do. Therefore, the rural informants I managed to include in this research are those who didn't have abortions and who felt perfectly comfortable to talk to me about their pregnancy and marriage.

Pilot Study

From March to May, I conducted a pilot study on the internet. I registered for several online chat-rooms and online instant messaging forums on the theme of abortion. I posted my research topic on those forums as well. I chatted informally with many people. These online chitchats prepared me for the informal language people use regarding romantic relationship and sexuality. For example, it is popular for people in love to address and refer to their partner as “Lao Gong/Lao Po” (affectionate terms for “husband/wife”) although they are not in a marital relationship. And there are many code names for sexual intercourse, menstruation, abortion, and sex organs. When I started my fieldwork, I was already familiar with these terms (but I did not use them because I felt uncomfortable). I coded the themes that most frequently appeared in these chitchats and put them into my interview

guide. The pilot study prepared me for the communication skills of chatting with strangers online. From late May to August, I located myself in Guangzhou and conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with informants on the Internet.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interview is the main method I used to collect data for this research. The most difficult part of this research was to find informants. Snowball sampling is not suitable for this research, because it involves a degree of violation of confidentiality for the person who introduces potential informants to me. In total I interviewed 28 people in Guangzhou (I will discuss about the 14 informants from Dongguan in Chapter 5). I conducted face-to-face interviews with the informants who didn't have abortion experiences. However, for the 15 women with abortion experiences, I conducted interviews with them on the Internet.

Among these 15 women, five of them were introduced to me through friends, the other ten volunteered to be interviewed after they read my posts for this project on the Internet. I managed to ask two of them out for tea, however, when we met in person, it was hard to talk about abortion. Thus I entirely relied upon the Internet when I carried out interviews. This was not only to protect women's privacy, but also to allow them to feel more comfortable to talk.

I trust the reliability of the data I collected through online interviews for several reasons. First, their narratives do not contradict my knowledge of abortion from other channels. Second, some of the informants (or their friends) I do know in person. Third, most of the interviews lasted over four hours until midnight, and it was the informant who did most of the talking. I truly felt their sincerity, and their psychological need to confess.

Other Resources

As I mentioned, the Internet was an important media for me to carry out the research. The source of texts comes from my informants' blogs, people's posts on forums and Bulletin board system (BBS)²⁷, and spontaneous group discussions in chat-rooms. All of these activities were carried out on the Internet.

²⁷ BBS, short for "Bulletin Board System" is used by people on the Internet for meeting people and having discussions on message boards, as well as for publishing articles, downloading software, playing games and many more things, all using a single application.

Information on BBS and forums is open to everyone. People post their stories and questions either with a registered ID or anonymously. Interested readers respond to these posts by posting their own comments and answers following the title of the original post, also with an ID or anonymously. Both parties' real identities are protected through this way. It's a free and safe space to communicate. It is very difficult to track the people behind these opinions. Censorship of China's BBS and forums mainly involves discussions on political topics. The freedom of speech in the visual space is rarely limited on other topics such as sex and abortion.

It is also very popular among people to exchange information and chitchat in online chat-rooms. This is a relatively exclusive domain than BBS and forums. Members of these chat-rooms are registered and they get to know with each other in these visual communities²⁸. I registered for three theme chat-rooms: "Abortion", "Contraception", and "Women's World", where questions are asked and answered by women. Members in these chat-rooms are mainly women. In every chat-room, there are some active members. They have established friendship in the virtual world. They often chat online and know about each other's past abortion experiences and current life updates. Although they have never met each other in reality, they regard each other "sisters". As time went by, I became one of their virtual "sisters." They sent me web links of their blogs, of BBS and forums where they posted stories of their abortion experiences for me to read. Those articles are generally detailed and emotional.

Very often, when a girl or woman asks a question or brings up an issue in a chat-room, the others will give advice or comments. Sometimes such spontaneous group chats can last from minutes to hours involving four or five women. They can be strangers to each other but show great concerns and patience to offer opinions. And there were follow-ups of the issue if the girl/woman decided to come back to update her story or to share other related problems. For instance, one young unmarried pregnant woman started a topic in a chat-room. During the following five months, she kept visiting this chat-room every now and then, and shared with us her stories of marriage planning, abortion, post-abortion care, and breakup. As a researcher, I find these group discussions very interesting and informative.

²⁸ For example, a woman I chatted with in a chat-room recognized my ID on the name list of another chat-room where she was a member as well. Because she had been a member there for a long time, with her introduction I received warm welcome by the others when I came to this chat-room. We never met in life.

Hospital Visits

During the three months of my fieldwork, I visited the gynecology departments of hospitals and clinics in Guangzhou twice a week. I had been to five major public hospitals and two private-owned clinics which specialized in gynecology and related fields. Besides interviewing doctors and hospital staff, I also talked to people of different social backgrounds in the waiting room on topics of premarital sex and abortion.

What I constantly observed and intensively experienced on these hospital visits, was the sense of shame and embarrassment. The public space created tremendous emotional pressure for me even as a woman who was there not for an abortion. I felt stigmatized merely by being present in a stigmatic situation.²⁹ I could only visit a hospital in the afternoon, because it always took me a whole morning to make up my mind to walk out of the door. However, I kept going. It was a way to help me understand my informants. And it made my fieldwork experience feel very real.

Reflexivity of the Researcher: Compassion

In her reflection on her experience of studying the Mexican students in an American university, Merchant acknowledges the need for compassion in research and suggests its importance in extending the boundaries of understanding:

When I speak about the need for compassion in research, I refer to compassion for self as well as others – a compassion that moves beyond blame – a space in which harmony and dissonance can coexist in ways that challenge and extend the boundaries of our understanding, so that we and those who participate in the research process with us not only transform the situations in which we find ourselves, but also are transformed by our interactions with each other. (2001: 17)

²⁹ Because the stigma of abortion for young women is not apparent, the gynecology department of a hospital where abortions are performed becomes a stigmatic place and made me, a young woman who was there not for an abortion but without an apparent differentness, run the risk of being easily discredited. Goffman gives an example of a female researcher's recounting her feelings while visiting an area associated with prostitution states which "would lend its coloring to anyone who chose to enter it... (Rolph cited in Goffman, 1963: 104)."

Merchant's insightful illustration aptly describes my experience as a researcher, and I share her view on compassion for feminist research. During my field work, I have constantly asked myself these questions: What role does compassion play in my research? How does it influence the relationship between me and the informants? How does compassion transform the experience of research?

I didn't understand what it meant to have "a compassion that moves beyond blame" at the beginning. I simply tried to be nice when I started to interview people. However, I kept hearing my informants say that I wouldn't understand. I was confused. After weeks of talking with people, I eventually acquired the right attitude to understand: I've learned not to ask "Why didn't you practice contraception" in the first place; I've learned to drop my intention to reduce the abortion rate; I have learned to be supportive in ways other than being a self-appointed educator or liberator. I realized that compassion is a necessary emotional element for any researcher to start to listen to her informants. And only when I look at abortion without attempts at prevention, can I concentrate on other aspects of the issue.

My data collection method was extremely flexible. I conducted most of the interviews with informants on the Internet. I have never met some of the informants in reality. I didn't strictly follow an interview guide. I let my informants lead the conversation most of time. There was no time limit for interviews. On some occasions, I allowed myself to be emotionally involved and even wept with the informants.

I became increasingly considerate through interacting with informants. When I started, I didn't have sufficient knowledge about the topic and my subjects. Most of the literature I read about abortion aimed to investigate this issue to reduce the abortion rate or resolve a moral debate. I was misled by the literature and I thought a nice and polite manner was good enough to listen and understand. It took me quite a while to realize my mistake. And I eventually saw that the issue was not abortion. It was about women experiencing sexuality in a rapidly changing society. It was about individuals' negotiation with social norms and contesting values to maximize and find meaning in their lives. Finally, it was about one's effort in overcoming life's challenges and unexpected events, in seeking an understanding of the self, and in trying to maintain one's dignity.

I experienced compassion from my informants too. In the virtual world on the Internet, my informants helped me gain trust and reputation in chat-rooms in online

discussion and therefore my topic attracted more people's attention. They talked to me about their experiences. What's more, during the summer of my fieldwork, I had personal problems and was emotionally fragile. For the first time of my life, I was a pathetic "love fool" myself.³⁰ My informants cared about me more than anyone could hope for from a stranger. They spent hours chatting with me and consoled me with warm words. It was beyond me how they had such patience in telling me their stories and had interest in listening to mine as well. Their compassion for me not only transformed my experience as a researcher but also as a person. It helped to resolve the unequal power relationship between them and me in research, and taught me important lessons in human relationships and mutual support.

It's said that feminist research is about recognizing personal experiences as valid source of knowledge, about raising the silenced people's voices and about nonhierarchical forms of research. I argue that having a sense of compassion is critical in extending our boundaries of understanding between the researcher and informants. Moreover, compassion enables us to extend our understanding towards the greater issues of humanity. Therefore we don't only see those we want to see, and don't only hear those we want to hear. Through my research experience, I realized that these are not only methodological issues, but also central concerns for human beings. And I believe that it is this sense of compassion that makes my research feminist research.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 talks about love, the reason that my informants gave for having sex, getting pregnant, and having abortions. This chapter explores the varied experiences of abortion among young women. As romantic love is a theme repeatedly emphasized and measured in their reflections, while sexuality is severely suppressed and ignored, I discuss how and why men are central to the abortion experience.

³⁰ I doubt if I would be able to conduct this research and to reach the degree of understanding were not that I had a heartbreaking breakup in that summer. Before that, I was a girl happily in love and couldn't really feel the pain my informants had experienced. After that summer, I've recovered from the breakup and grown to be a tough and sober woman armed with feminist thoughts. I think it would be hard for the present me to open to strangers without a defensive (may even be a little sarcastic) mind and to carry out those very emotional interviews. But last summer, I was totally soft and lonely. I was willing to share my sorrow. Although I didn't experience an abortion of fetus, I experienced an abortion of a five-year love relationship. I had no intention to feel any wiser or tougher than my women informants. In fact I found that many of my informants were wiser and tougher than I was from their experience of unhappy love affairs.

Chapter 3 is a study of passing. The abortion experience is an invisible stigma for the women involved. I focus on two parties women choose to hide the experience from: their family and men. For all the women in this study, they didn't lie to the man who impregnated them but to the man in their next love relationship. Their motives to cover are different in regard to family and partner. This chapter examines the women's motives and strategies of passing.

For some women, the biggest challenge may not lie in passing in the outer world, but in dealing with the inner self. Chapter 4 considers women's perceptions towards fetus life, abortion, and their identity change. A great amount of verbal strategies are adopted by them to make sense of their experiences. What's more, some women try to learn lessons from their abortions. This chapter looks at the painstaking self-healing process of women with an effort to understand their emotional complex.

Chapter 5 draws attention to a different location and people: peasant workers in Dongguan. Encountering the same problematic situation of premarital pregnancy, the young peasant workers in this study made a different choice: they married the man and had the baby. Do the two different patterns (marriage and abortion) of women's choices tell a fundamentally different story on the social reality of women in China? This chapter examines the forces that drive women to two different paths to see who is exercising the power of controlling a woman's reproductive behavior.

As the concluding part of this thesis, chapter 6 summarizes previous chapters and returns to the theme of this study: how do women negotiate an abortion experience in the social context of today's China?

Chapter 2 Love: Abortion and Romantic Relationships

In this chapter, I explore how the romantic relationship, and the emotional and material support the woman gains from her boyfriend, determines whether her abortion experience is smooth or disruptive. A crisis situation like abortion calls for a new definition of the relationship, which can strengthen or break the tie between two young people. On the one hand, support from the male partner, and sometimes also from his family, may alleviate or even eliminate the stigma of premarital pregnancy and abortion for the woman. On the other hand, the male partner's abandonment will leave a woman in a desperate situation. This chapter looks at the role the romantic relationship plays in Chinese women's abortion experiences, and how an abortion can influence the romantic relationship. People's comments on unmarried women having abortions are also provided in this chapter. Moreover, the possibility of turning a deviant situation into a normal one by marriage is discussed.

2.1 Varied Experiences of Abortion

The experiences of abortion, like other human experiences, are varied by circumstances. Abortion is not necessarily a sad experience. As I'll show in this section, an abortion can sometimes be a smooth and even sweet experience. It is not that these women didn't experience shock and fear. But their negative emotions were soothed by their positive interaction with their male partners and others. I'll also provide accounts of disruptive and ambiguous experiences of abortion in this chapter. My point is that for many unmarried women, their love relationships define their abortion experiences, and their abortion experiences influence their love relationships. An unplanned pregnancy is more than the result of a failure of contraceptive use and an abortion is more than terminating an unwanted pregnancy.

2.1.1 Abortion as a Smooth Experience

The following two accounts show that an abortion experience for the woman can be smooth as long as she is well treated by her significant others. A 21-year-old college student recalled her abortion experience rather complacently:

On the day of operation, my husband and my mother-in-law accompanied me to the hospital. I was scared to death. But meanwhile I felt very fortunate to have them there. (How was the operation?) Oh, it was scary! I cried. They used anesthesia so I didn't know anything during the operation. After it was finished, my husband carried me in his arms to the bed in another room so I could rest. And I found my mother-in-law had already put a sanitary napkin in my underwear. She was very considerate. I spent three weeks with his family after the operation. They were nice to me and cooked nutritious meals to help me recover. I was treated like a princess. During those nights when my feet were cold, my mother-in-law even slept at the other end of the bed and warmed my feet with her temperature. I was deeply touched. (Where was your boyfriend then?) He was there. But we were not allowed to sleep in the same room during that time, for my good. My mother-in-law thought she knew better about how to take care of me. (Did your parents know about your abortion?) No, I insisted that we should not tell them.

In this case, although the woman was not yet married to her boyfriend, she felt very comfortable to address her boyfriend and his family members as if she was married. The warm acceptance and care she received from the man's family had resolved the stigmatized nature of her unplanned pregnancy and abortion. Despite the physical pain, all that she received were expressions of love. Kind gestures from the man's family are very effective in resolving the shame and fear a woman often feels for her unplanned pregnancy. And in this case, the man's mother did more than a daughter-in-law can hope for. Therefore, the woman's abortion experience was a smooth one.

Another young woman experienced an abortion smoothly in another way:

We were both sixteen, in high school. We didn't have the money to have an abortion. So my boyfriend borrowed money from his friends. It was a rainy Friday afternoon and he insisted on me taking a taxi to the hospital, but he himself ran all the way there. (How did that happen?) We went to different high schools. After the abortion I asked for three days' sick leave from school. Altogether we spent almost a week at his friend's spare apartment so I could recover. There were just the two of us. He tried his best to take care of me. He was such a sweetheart. He saved all the good food for me to eat but he

only ate instant noodles. It was a hard experience, my first abortion, but I didn't feel hard at all. All that I felt was love. Oh, did I mention the chicken soup he made? It was his first time to cook. And he didn't know that he should remove the hen's gallbladder to make soup. It tasted so bitter! (Grimace and laughs.) Ah... all those sweet memories. I loved him so much.

In this case, the two teenage lovers had financial hardship but they chose to solve the crisis on their own. Compared to the previous case, the stigmatized nature of the girl's abortion was not alleviated, but mutual love was enhanced. This is exactly why the girl tasted sweetness from a bitter experience: to face and solve a crisis together with her loved one. The whole process reflected the young couple's independence and codependence. The successful "damage control" of her teenage pregnancy enhanced the girl's faith in her lover and herself. During the following two years, she had three more abortions after being impregnated by the same man. But it was the first one that she remembered in the most detail and as being the least disruptive. She recalled that on her fourth pregnancy, her boyfriend joked that she became pregnant much easier than any other woman in the world. From this anecdote, we can understand why she was so sentimentally attached to her first abortion. It must be much more difficult for her than her boyfriend to have a sense of humor about a fourth unwanted pregnancy.

As a stigmatized behavior, abortion has the potential to cause women's sense of self-derogation. For the two women in this section, the fact that the man's family treated her "like a princess" and the fact that her boyfriend made small sacrifices but insisted that she be well treated had a smoothing and protecting effect. Moreover, in both cases, the women's significant others were able to manage the stigma so that privacy was preserved and further damage prevented. That was another important factor that makes the abortion experience smooth.

2.1.2 Abortion as a disruptive experience

Women's abortion experiences were disruptive in different ways. Both the women discussed in this section encountered the men's abandonment right in the middle of the crisis situation. For the first woman, a carefully-kept secret of her abortion past with her ex-boyfriend was accidentally revealed to her current boyfriend at the hospital when they were there for her second abortion:

When the doctor asked about my medical history, I told her that I had an abortion two years ago. It was with my ex-boyfriend. When my boyfriend heard that, he was caught off guard and didn't say anything. His attitude sharply changed on the spot. He didn't feel sorry any more. That whole day was a disastrous experience for me. He refused to talk to me even though he saw me in great pain aborting the fetus. He was so disgusted with me that he didn't touch me at all. I could only swallow the tears into my stomach. I think he thought of breaking up with me. (Are you still together now?) Yes, we are. But he doesn't treasure me any more. He treats me coldly nowadays. It feels like I owe him. (Why don't you find another man to start anew?) Easy to say. Who will want a woman who's had two abortions? Even if I don't tell, it would eventually be exposed. I started anew with him. I can't start anew again, not any more. I'm so cursed. Actually during that day in the hospital, I felt so much pain, in my stomach, my head, my heart, my whole body. I blew my last chance to reach happiness. I was so numbed by the pain that I didn't cry. He was silent. He was worse than a stranger. He was never like that before. I don't know how to describe my feelings. I just felt like I was in hell.

In this case, her current boyfriend's abrupt change of attitude broke the woman's heart at the time she most needed his support. The incident also cut off her last glimmer of hope to walk out of the negative experience and to seek her happiness. The man's contempt and anger at his girlfriend's past abortion immediately and completely replaced his sense of guilt for making her go through an abortion. The woman accepted all the mistreatment from the man and didn't break up with him even though she could no longer feel happiness in this relationship. She was totally defeated.

The following woman's experience was the most disruptive among all of the women I interviewed:

When I told him I was pregnant, he gave me two hundred yuan and broke up with me. For a couple of days I didn't want to face the fact. I tried to forget that I was pregnant. I didn't go to the hospital until I was three months pregnant. When the doctor asked me why I came so late, I didn't know how

to answer. I didn't use anesthesia because I could only afford the cheapest abortion. When I was asked to place my body in that shameful position (meaning the Stirrups), I felt completely humiliated. I hated myself. It was very painful. When the cold equipment was inserted into my body, I felt violated again. I wished I could die there. I passed out on the table twice. The doctor didn't judge me but I judged myself. I didn't burst into tears until I went back home and washed my bloodstained clothes. After the abortion, I barely had money for food. There was less than twenty yuan in my pocket. I survived for almost two weeks on that money. It was very tough. I don't know how I pulled through it. The abortion changed me forever.

For this woman, the man's abandonment not only broke her heart but also left her in severe financial hardship. The problematic situation turned into a matter of her very survival. The time she took to collect money for the abortion made her operation more dangerous and painful than it needed to be. For this woman, every detail of her abortion experience had become symbols of stigma: the physical position on the Stirrups, the pain without anesthesia, her bloodstained clothes, and the twenty yuan she survived on. They all pointed to shame and rejection, and added extra negative symbolic meaning to her abortion experience as a whole. Her shameful feelings were the strongest among all women I interviewed because she was forced into a situation to bear all responsibility and solve the crisis by herself.

During the research, I encountered women who had no intention of continuing a relationship but chose to delay the breakup simply because they needed the men's help to get through their abortions. However, when abandonment occurs, the woman's already problematic situation becomes even more problematic. There is no one to share her economic, emotional, and moral burdens. Such circumstances can hardly turn an abortion experience into anything positive.

2.1.3 Abortion as an Ambiguous Experience

Despite the distinctly smooth and disruptive experiences, I categorized some women's abortion experiences as ambiguous. The ambiguity of the romantic relationship creates ambiguous meanings for the abortion experience. In the following two women's cases, although the men provided concrete help and support throughout the process, the meaning of abortion was ambiguous.

When I told him on the phone about my pregnancy, he was shocked and after a while the first question he asked me was, "Is there anyone to accompany you to the hospital?" I was so hurt! You see, first he didn't want the baby, second he wasn't even planning to be there, and last he didn't ask about me at all! (Was he there eventually?) Yes. I hung up the phone and he realized he was wrong. But it was never the same after that. He came back immediately and took good care of me all the way through it. But so what? I couldn't love him any more. I was hurt and disappointed. He apologized many times but I just can't forgive him for that. (Would you have kept the baby if he wanted it?) No, I wouldn't. I hadn't finished graduate school at the time. I couldn't quit school in the middle to have a baby. My family would be greatly ashamed. Even if I got married, it would be too embarrassing to explain to relatives and friends. I couldn't let that happen. (Then what difference did his response make?) It made me feel alone.

In this case, the man's first response didn't meet the woman's expectation. This inconsiderate response blurred the meaning of their love relationship. Although he tried hard to make up with the woman thereafter, the woman could not forgive him. After three years, the woman still remembers the man's apathetic line word by word. It is amazing that one single line can change a relationship. But I found hers was not an isolated case.

During my research, I generalized from the interviews to list out some first responses that women do not want to hear from men. They are as follows:

Silence (any silence or hesitant gesture)

"What do you want to do?"

"I respect your choice no matter what you decide."

"When shall we go to the hospital?"

"Are you sure it's mine?"

Words that women want to hear are as follows:

"Don't worry. I am here."

"Let's get married."

“Great! I’m going to be a dad!”

As we can see, women expect supportive first responses from their male partners when they decide to break the news to them. Sometimes when the men hesitate, women forget the fact that the men are about their age and need time to process the shocking news. The vulnerability of men is not allowed by a panicked woman at such a time, and that’s how some women believe that this first response is an important indicator of their future relationship, or at least an indicator of the man’s maturity. They evaluate their relationships in the context of an unplanned pregnancy. Such a significant moment leaves a longstanding impression on them.

Another kind of ambiguity stems from the problems that already existed in a romantic relationship, for example, the man’s love affair with a third party. A woman recalled how she got pregnant and decided to have an abortion as follows:

When I learned that the other girl was pregnant, I was so mad at him but secretly I hoped to get pregnant too. What a weird thought! I don’t know why I felt that way. Crazy, wasn’t I? But you know, women are scarily stupid sometimes. Stupid, and scary. I must have been out of my mind. So I made love with him without using contraceptive one night. The next morning I regretted it immediately and took a morning-after pill. But this pregnancy thing is very tricky. You see, we cohabited for three years as undergraduate students and we were pretty wild at the time – but never did we get caught by pregnancy. And this time I was! Ironically it was just after that girl’s abortion. You have no idea how I felt when I found out I was pregnant. I was like, “What is this supposed to mean?” He proposed marriage to me when he learned about it. But I was not over his previous affair. And I had taken the morning-after pill, which was very bad for the fetus. So we definitely couldn’t keep the baby.

In this case, besides the woman’s concerns of eugenics, her boyfriend’s love affair was the key issue that prevented her from marrying him and carrying the pregnancy to term. It was an intended and impulsive act for her to have sex with her boyfriend without using contraception. The sexual intercourse was an act of jealousy and anger, which blurred the meaning of the pregnancy. Her problematic relationship caused the

woman to be unsure about her baby's future, and the fact that she took the morning-after pill gave her a concrete reason to terminate the pregnancy.

2.2 Stupid, Stupider, Stupidest

Among the people I interviewed who didn't have abortion experiences, most of them try to avoid using "moral/immoral" terms to judge women who have abortion experiences. However, all of them applied a certain degree of the "wise/stupid" standard. Although they call the women "stupid (傻, 蠢)", it has different connotations. Sometimes they mean it in a loving tone, sometimes in an indifferent tone, sometimes in an anxious tone, and sometimes in a rejecting tone. People who make these comments share the view that it is a stupid mistake for women to get pregnant as a result of romantic relationship.

A female gynecologist comments in an emotionally detached tone,

There are so many options for contraception. If you don't like condoms you can take the pill. If you have difficulty remembering to take the pill everyday, you can take a contraceptive shot and it lasts for months. ... I think our sex education is so poor that people don't know that there are many options for contraception. (But I found there are emotional and cultural factors that prevent people from choosing certain contraceptive methods. What do you think?) That's my next point. Some people are well educated and informed, but they think like peasants³¹ (雖然接受過高等教育卻還是改不了農民意識). Why should your body pay the price for your romantic relationship? That's so stupid (愚蠢).

This tone with a sense of emotional detachment is found among many medical staff. Doctors are used to singling the body out, and treating it rationally, as a part independent from emotions. According to this female gynecologist, knowledge and awareness can solve all problems. Contraceptive knowledge and technology are supposed to prevent a woman from having an unwanted pregnancy and set her body free. In other words, a woman should never mess up her body when her love life is

³¹ It is common for people in China to make such an analogy of peasants' thoughts when they refer to ways of thinking that's feudalistic, ignorant, and backward.

messed up. Blame your lack of knowledge if you don't know how to practice contraception. But if you know and don't use that knowledge to protect your health, you have nobody to blame but yourself, because you are thinking "like a peasant (農民意識)."

A male gynecologist I interviewed was very confident and expressive. As I'd read some literature about male gynecologists' views toward their job, I asked how he felt about his job and whether he feels awkward being a gynecologist. He explained:

No, I think male gynecologists have some advantage in helping patients. I can offer my patients opinions from a man's perspective. I'm not like female gynecologists who sometimes just echo the patients' view that "There isn't a single good man in this whole world! (男人沒一個好東西)" What's the use of saying such things? ("What do you say to your patients then?") For example, last week a patient came here for her third abortion. I said to her, "This man is not going to marry you. Are you out of your mind? I am a man, and I tell you, if this man has the slightest intension of marrying you, he will not make you go through three abortions. Wake up! Don't be so stupid!" And I told her if she has any more abortions, her uterus would not be able to hold the fetus when she wants a baby in the future. In Chinese society, a sterile woman is "useless" (一個女人如果不能生孩子, 就成了癡人). That's the social reality. (What was her response?) She cried on the spot.

This young male doctor believes that his opinion is more convincing than that of female doctors because he doesn't only talk from a medical perspective, but also from a gender perspective by telling the patients what men think. What's more, he is not from the women's camp. In this way his views are projected as unbiased and more effective in "waking up" the patients. When I was interviewing him, a middle-aged female gynecologist in the same office listened and smiled. She added that, "The patients have difficulty trusting women's opinions. I'm glad to see that we have more and more young men gynecologists nowadays. It's hard for the patients to disagree with men." It was delightful to talk with this male doctor because he was very expressive. But from time to time I felt uneasy for his patients. I wondered if

none of the women knew what he pointed out before they came to see the doctor. What if the male doctor was spelling out their worries, at their weakest moment?

Other people's comments are not so heavily from a scientific or educational perspective as the medical professionals. Two male graduate students gave their opinions as follows:

It's okay if my girlfriend is not a virgin. But if she had abortion before?

Definitely no. It's just too stupid a mistake for a girl to make (犯這種低級錯誤也太蠢了吧). I can't accept that.

I can accept a non-virgin to be my girlfriend, but if she is a virgin, I will have a stronger sense of responsibility for her – after all she gives me her most precious thing. (我觉得外国人遇到一个 virgin, 会很惊奇. 中国人遇到了, 会很感动.) A girl of abortion past? No. I'd rather she doesn't tell me if she has. I hope she'll keep it from me all her life. (What if she wants to confide?) Oh, only stupid women tell everything to the man (什么都说出来, 那是蠢女人吧). (But what if you find out?) Then it depends on where we are in our relationship. I think I will end it if I am not deeply committed to the relationship yet. But if I love her very much, I won't leave her, but it will still hurt tremendously. That's why I say, please be smart, never ever let me know.

These two students, both in their mid-twenties, think they are open-minded enough to accept that a girl has sexual experience. They both have had sexually-involved romantic relationships before. They compare themselves with some Chinese men that insist on having virgin wives in today's society, and they consider themselves liberated. "It's about [our] feelings, not [a desire to] discriminate," they emphasized. It is obvious that they hold a double standard against women regarding sexual experience. This double standard maintains that it is perfectly fine for men to be sexually involved in romantic relationships, but not okay for women. And if the women go so far as to get themselves into the trouble of pregnancy and abortion, they'd better be smart and cover it up for the rest of their lives.

The male doctor and graduate students' comments indicate that although "liberal" men now admit that they can no longer monopolize women's vaginas, they

continue to hold on to the fortress of the uterus, seeing a woman's impregnation by another man as a violation of their status and rights as men. The logic of men's right to monopolize women's bodies remains unchanged. I will elaborate more about this matter in the next chapter.

Women who had abortions themselves are more tolerant to women who share such a past. However, regarding the number of abortions, they find it difficult not to judge. Many women were curious about my other informants' records. They tried to place themselves on my chart. They liked to ask me questions such as "What's the highest number among your informants?" "Does it happen to many women?" "I had three abortions, is that rare?" The following comment is typical:

[Someone] had five abortions? Really? That's too much! I myself had two abortions so I can't judge women with abortion experience. But five times? It should have made her learn in one way or another (怎麼樣也應該學乖了吧). She is so stupid to hurt herself like that.

This woman feels torn between two attachments. Being a woman with two abortions herself, she feels less confident to feel morally superior to women with similar experiences. However, she can't help having a sense of superiority to women with more abortions than her. In other words, she believes that even if she is not "more moral" than that woman, she is "smarter" than them. She thinks the proof that she has learned is that she hasn't hurt herself by any more abortions. She judges women with abortion experience by the number they have had.

The general view seems to expect an abortion to leave a mark on a woman's life. Although the women are granted the right to abort, if they abort repeatedly, the behavior is viewed by other people as dangerous and incomprehensible. Zoja insightfully points out that "the nature of a right is not altered by the fact that a person repeatedly chooses to exercise it (Zoja 1997: 26)." However, I find that few people view the abortion right in such a way. My informants, including most of the women who had abortions, tend to think that to have an abortion is to correct a mistake or to undo a wrong. If one repeatedly resorts to abortion, she must be making the same mistake again and again. And that makes her a stupid woman; a woman who can never learn.

My question to them is: “Why do women have to learn?” I didn’t realize that my modest feminist training actually kicked in when such a question came to my mind. Such a question seemed to be rather stupid in my informants’ eyes. They respond, “Why? Because she is a woman!” All of my informants believe that women’s anatomy determines her to be more responsible for a pregnancy to happen. As an unwanted pregnancy is either a failure or non-use of contraception, the woman should know better since she was born to bear the consequence of such failures. But this logic is obviously blaming the victim. As Boyle points out, “it is ironic that women should bear the major responsibility for contraception when heterosexual relationships can be seen as a site of inequality where women in general have less power than men to control the progress and content of an encounter” (1997: 92). The irony, as Boyle sees, is that sexual encounter as an activity that’s initially defined by the man, the responsibility of contraception goes the woman. Although Boyle has made explicit the power structure in a sexual encounter, few people in my study seem to be willing to engage in the “biological unfairness” discussion. In their opinion, there is little women can do about the fact of their female body. Therefore, it’s useless to argue on this matter. What they can do is to be smart and protect themselves from being hurt.

2.3 A Happy Ending

A woman getting pregnant without a marriage offer is generally regarded as stupid in my informants’ eyes. However, she can cleverly turn the situation around by creating a happy ending, i.e. getting married – and only if she marries up socially and economically. People are usually more critical of marriages that happen under such circumstances. They see a “happy marriage” as a marriage that includes a matching family of the groom, a considerate husband, a loving relationship, and such a marriage excludes all signs of compromise from the bride’s side.

In the following group discussion, A is an unmarried woman who is four and a half months’ pregnant. This afternoon she came into a women-only chat-room to complain about her fiancé.

A: I’m so mad. He wouldn’t go to take wedding pictures!!!

B: Why not?

A: He says that I'm four and a half months' pregnant so he insists we take pictures after I give birth. But how can I throw a wedding without any wedding pictures?!

(Save thirty minutes of discussion over the wedding.)

C: So he doesn't seem to be very enthusiastic on this wedding thing.

D: Have you two got the marriage license?

A: Not yet.

C: And the birth permit!?

B: Hurry up! Forget about the wedding picture for now! Get the marriage license done first. This is to make sure he "pays his bill (別回來他不認帳)." Does his family know about your pregnancy?

A: Yes. They are on my side. Only my husband doesn't want to get married.

D: You really need to get the marriage license, otherwise you are going to be a single mother. He can run away any time.

(After thirty minutes of discussion over the marriage license and birth permit application process.)

E: Do you really want to have this man's baby? You are pregnant but he doesn't help at all. Do you think he loves you? You guys keeping urging her to get married, but is this a happy marriage?

A: Bullshit. He loves me. He loves me. He loves me. He loves me. He loves me. He loves me. He loves me. He loves me.

D: I sense your boyfriend doesn't love you. If possible I suggest you don't get married and have an abortion.

A: (many crying faces) Why is my life so miserable (我的命怎麼這麼苦)!

E: Sorry but we don't mean to be harsh. It's for your good. We are women and we are thinking of your good. We just want to tell you an unhappy marriage is only worse.

A: You don't know. I love him. I can't live without him.

B: Sigh. We are just offering opinions. Poor silly girl, please don't be sad. Do what you want to do.

In this group discussion, A is marrying the baby's father although he obviously lacks interest in marrying her. There are a lot of things to be done to get married properly. But A is inexperienced. She is worrying about the wedding picture, which seems to be the least important thing regarding her situation. Two dramatic turns occurred in this group discussion. The first turn was when the other women found that A hadn't applied for a marriage license yet. They pointed out A's miscalculation over this matter and urged her to get the marriage license done first to technically tie the man up. The second turn occurred when a woman pointed out that the man didn't seem to love her. And A's over reaction confirmed this observation. Then some women started to suggest that she get an abortion because "an unhappy marriage is only worse."

Therefore, in this case, A didn't successfully turn her pregnancy into a happy ending even though the man's family has officially accepted her and she is getting married. The most important factor is missing in this marriage: the man's love and support for A. Therefore, although A is getting married instead of getting an abortion, she is still a "poor silly girl" in other women's eyes.

I consider this group discussion to be a good demonstration of people's values and moral preference. Although A seems to hold different views than the other women in this discussion – A insists on marrying the man while the other women have reservation about her decision, they all value the romantic relationship over the fetus' life. A wants to continue her pregnancy because she wants to marry the man in the first place. The other women try to persuade her to terminate the pregnancy because they don't think her relationship is promising. It did not occur to them that the pregnancy itself may be a sufficient reason to give birth.³² For them, the meaning of a pregnancy lies in the romantic relationship, not in its conception of life.

³² Pro-life, as an important perspective in the debate in the United States as well as globally, believes that human life should be valued from fertilization until natural death and therefore should not be killed by abortion. A life has a right to live from the moment of conception. Such an idea didn't appear in the discussion I quote in this section. For the women involved in this discussion, they all judge whether A should carry her pregnancy to term from the perspective of her romantic relationship. The chance for a baby to be born is closely related to how promising the romantic relationship is.

2.4 Conclusion: Why Are Men Central to the Abortion Experience?

A distinct characteristic of the women's narratives in this chapter is that a major portion of their reflection of their abortion experiences is devoted to the discussion of their romantic relationships. The two narratives were so intertwined that sometimes they became one story. This suggests that the meaning of abortion is negotiated and constructed by some women socially through their perceptions of their love relationships. On the one hand, expressions of love can alter the symbolic meaning of an abortion; on the other hand, however, an abortion may question the symbolic meaning of a love relationship.

Women's feelings about their abortion sometimes became less important and memorable than their feelings of love. In shaping her abortion experience, a woman's interaction with her significant others play a key role. For many unmarried women, their romantic relationships are the most critical in determining whether such an experience is smooth, disruptive, or ambiguous, as they look for expressions of love from their male partner. Moreover, they often unconsciously define themselves by their male partner's responses.

From people's comments on abortion, I noticed that they tend to judge women who have had abortions along a "wise/stupid" scale rather than on a "moral/immoral" scale. This verbal strategy reflects the pragmatism regarding the issue of abortion in the context of Chinese society. However, the discursive difference does not translate to social tolerance for unmarried women. The double standard that discriminates against women regarding sexual behavior is deeply rooted in people's minds. Hardly any men accept having girlfriends who had had abortions with other men. Therefore, abortion remains a stigma for unmarried women and is very likely to harm their future romantic relationships.

The "wise/stupid" standard also reflects the fact that when people judge women on their abortion experiences, they are judging their romantic relationships at the same time. A woman who gets herself trapped in an abortion is often viewed by others as suffering from the consequences of being stupidly in love, or of her miscalculation of a woman's well-being. As I've shown in this chapter, people think women are stupid when they hurt their body when their life is messed up, believe a man even when he caused her to have abortion more than once, confess a past abortion to others, and abort repeatedly. These comments address issues other than

abortion itself. Abortion is obviously not the only thing about women that people can't tolerate. The real issue is the socially constructed ideal life of women. There is a list of dos and don'ts for them to follow so that she can achieve a happy successful life. Premarital pregnancy is obviously one of the mistakes that distract her from this bright path. And if she fails to get back on path, she is being downright stupid.

In some circumstances, a happy marriage can artfully turn a scandal into a blessing. It's the triumph of love. However, people's examination of such marriages is likely to be more critical than average, and they are likely to have higher expectations of the bride. This tendency confirms again the stigmatized nature of a premarital pregnancy. A woman needs to have an above-average marriage if she wants to resolve people's judgment of her deviant premarital pregnancy. Her marriage needs to strictly fit into a standard happy marriage to fully convince people that her life isn't compromised in the love discourse or she isn't simply surrendering to a stigmatized situation. Her marriage needs to contain both the rational calculation of economic investments and the irrational mystique of a romantic bond.³³ In other words, she should neither marry a man who doesn't love her nor marry someone incompatible to her economical status simply because she is pregnant. She is only being stupid if she chooses to do either.

In conclusion, the romantic relationships of unmarried women play a key role in defining the women's experiences of abortion. Women use a discourse of love to make sense of their abortion experience and feel consistent in the choices they make. The result of their relationship is an important factor in how people judge these women. A happy marriage can resolve the stigmatized nature of a premarital pregnancy when it fits into the picture of the ideal life for women. Abortion is not treated as an isolated issue either by the people who conduct it or by the people who comment on it. Rather, it is whether the woman is aware and committed to a successful happy life defined by the mainstream discourses that matters.

33 According to Illouz, for people to be fully convinced that they are in love, the experience of love is supposed to be disinterested in selfish gain, but meanwhile it involves the conscious and calculated elements of economic investments. (1997:241) This standard is not only true for the two parties in a romantic relationship, but also for people from outside to judge a successful love relationship.

Chapter 3 Lies: Concealing about One's Abortion Experience

This chapter considers secrecy and the stigmatized nature of premarital abortion. All of the women I interviewed had lied about their abortion to a certain degree in their social relationships. They regard lying as a defense and survival strategy. Their families are unanimously the last people these women would like to turn to, even as a source for help in this crisis situation. By concealing the information from their families, women think they are protecting their families from suffering a courtesy stigma. As a woman moves on to a new romantic relationship, she needs to carefully hide her stigmatized past from the man. If she fails to do so, her new relationship is almost certainly to end up in a breakup. The need for women to disguise creates a market for hospitals to offer particular medical services. They go so far as to provide hymen repair. Some hospitals promote their services as a way to empower the stigmatized women. An industry to help women lie is therefore available. This chapter will look at the fast-growing business of gynecology clinics with their overwhelming advertisements, which is in sharp contrast with the silence of the society over the issue of abortion. Furthermore, I will evaluate women's accommodation and resistance to the social norms that discriminate their sexual experiences through their effort to pass by lying.

3.1 What Is A Lie?

What defines a lie, according to scholars and professionals, is not in the truthfulness of the statement; rather, is in the person's intent to deceive. In other words, lying is saying something one believes to be false with the intent to deceive.

Webster Dictionary defines the verb "lie" as:

- 1: to make an untrue statement with intent to deceive
- 2: to create a false or misleading impression

So lying is basically about making a statement. In spite of actually telling a lie, lying also includes the range of means whereby people may be misled, such as withholding information, disguises, silence, and inaction.

For some women's cases, I tend to regard their abortion indeed as an act of lying, because they withhold the truth of a premarital pregnancy. They continue to lie about their abortion experience simply to cover the first lie. For example, a teenager has an abortion quietly so that nobody knows she was ever pregnant. For some other women, there may not be a need to lie about their abortions in the first place. But later they choose to lie to particular people for particular reasons. For example, the pregnancy of a woman in a stable relationship may be acknowledged by both families, but due to economical concerns, the couple is not ready to get married and have the baby. So an abortion is accepted. In this case, if the woman happens to break up with the man later on, she is likely to conceal her abortion experience from her next boyfriend and his family.

3.2 Lying to the Family

When a woman chooses to lie to her family about her abortion, truth is often secondary to the honorable intention to protect the feelings of her parents, or to the great fear of upsetting them. Women developed strategies to withhold information from their family and consider this action to be a genuine expression of love and responsibility. As to the question of why they choose to lie, many of my informants said that they don't want to make their parents worry or to hurt their parent's feelings.

Many women think that as long as they keep it a secret from their parents, the parents would not be ashamed or hurt by their behavior. In this way they believe that as long as they don't let their parents know, they have done at least one right thing from the whole wrong. Lying is a lesser evil than telling, and it is downright necessary. It's the last chance for a woman to show her sense of responsibility and to show her desire to be a good daughter.

I noticed that women would try their best to conceal to their family. At the same time, they have a strong desire to tell and to share their emotional burden with their loved ones. A university student described how hard it was for her to face her parents when she was undergoing an abortion:

During the time I was about to have an abortion and after I had it done, I called home several times. I cried on the phone. I couldn't check my impulse to cry as soon as I heard my mom's voice, but I bit my tongue about the real

reason for my sadness. I just couldn't tell the truth to them. My parents have done so much for me. I didn't want to hurt their feelings. I couldn't do that to them.

For this woman, she felt deeply sorry to her parents. By withholding the truth from them, she shouldered all the sadness and hurt feelings of her abortion. It was her way of paying back her parents who had done so much for her. She made several calls home during that time, because she badly needed the emotional support of her family, but the sense of guilt eventually stopped her from confiding in them. She felt responsible to prevent her parents from being hurt by her misbehavior. She lied to protect them.

For younger women, such as teenagers, lying is likely to be out of fear. Younger women like to use words such as "they will beat me to death if I tell them" to explain why they have to lie. For women who live with their family, due to the limited living space or the existence of a watchful mother, they need to try extra hard to deceive.

In an abortion-theme chat room on the Internet, a high school girl is urgently doing research on the symptoms of taking abortion pills. She needs to find a way to fake a scene of menstrual period to deceive her mother:

A: Can anyone tell me what exactly is it like to take abortion pills?

B: You take pills everyday for three days. On the third day you are supposed to abort the fetus and after that you will continue to bleed for several days. If you stop bleeding after a week, you are good. If you keep bleeding for over ten days you must go to consult a doctor in the hospital.

A: Thank you so much. Are you sure I will bleed?

C: Yes. Why?

A: Great. I'm a high school student. I live at home. I need to fake a menstrual period so that my mom will not suspect.

When this girl learned that she would bleed for days after taking abortion pills, she was so relieved that she exclaimed "Great." If not given the context, such a strange reaction is barely understandable. It is obvious that her fear of being discovered by her family surpassed her fear of pain, bleeding, or the higher health risk of taking

abortion pills at home. In other words, she would pay a high price to keep it a secret. Being aware that her mother keeps an eye on her menstrual cycle, she is certain her mother will suspect when she misses a menstrual period. The girl found abortion pills an ideal solution for her to fake it in order to appeal to her mother's supervision.³⁴

Abortion is a top secret for many women, regardless how close they feel to their family members. A 22-year-old woman told me that she had always been on good terms with her family. She was proud to claim that she talked about everything with her mother. However, I found that abortion, which she had kept it a secret for years, was not on her list of "everything" that she talked about with her mother.

Once when I was chatting with my mom, I don't remember what we talked about but it initiated my strong desire and impulse to confide my abortion to her, and I did. I finally told her, after four years. It felt great. I was so relieved. (What did you say to her?) I just said, "Mom, actually I've had abortion before." I tried to sound as calm as I could. (How did she react?) She paused and was surprised. There was an awkward moment. Then she said, "Oh, that's no good, particularly for women. You should've been more careful." I was glad that she didn't over react or make a long speech. I guess it was because she wasn't sure what to say. (Did you tell her about all three abortions?) Of course I didn't. I just told her about one. (Which one?) Well, it was a combination of my three experiences. I spontaneously made up the story as I started to tell. It would be too much to tell her about all my abortions. But it still felt very good, you know, simply to let her know. (And how are you getting along now?) We've never gone back to that topic again. There is some sort of tacit agreement between us. It's not an untouchable

³⁴ In China, the living space is limited and most families live in apartments and share bathrooms. Privacy is hard for the children to keep also because most mothers tidy their children's rooms. What's more, there are several things about menstrual care that parents, the mother in particular, will do to show their love, such as not cooking spicy meals during the daughter's period. Some girls also report that their mothers wash their underwear for them. This is one of the many ways parents spoil their only children. Therefore, a careful and considerate mother knows whether their daughters have had periods every month. As a matter of fact, this informant later described to me how she hid the abortion pills and took the pills, say, when her mother was cooking in the kitchen. She said that once her secret was almost accidentally exposed when her mother was making her bed. The daughter managed to distract her mother in the last minute. It sounded very intensive and like a hide-and-seek game, despite that the mother was not aware that her daughter was hiding from her.

topic, but we just naturally don't mention it and pretend nothing happened. In this way I feel closer to Mom. I know she is keeping my secret for me.

This woman was one of the few I interviewed who actually (and bravely) revealed something about their abortion experiences to their family. Her revelation was an impulsive act. However, without any plan or calculation, she managed to make up a story about her abortion experience to her mother. It seemed that she instinctively measured her words and the amount of information to reveal from the moment she started to speak. She didn't tell her mother she had an abortion at the age of sixteen. Instead, she made it twenty-one, which sounds more acceptable. And she didn't tell her mother she had three abortions, she only told her about one. As Goffman notes, "A performer tends to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products (1959: 48)." This is exactly true for this woman's case. The idealized version of a good daughter is in no way related to any sexual mistakes. It is obvious that neither the mother nor the daughter feels comfortable to talk about sex although they have always been in good terms. Therefore, even when the woman decided to tell her mother, she bent the truth of her abortion experiences in order to maintain some image of her being a good daughter in front of her mother. And this incidence of confession has been tacitly underplayed by both the mother and daughter ever since.

A 24-year-old woman, who has worked in IT industry for two years, told me how her communication with her family over sexually related topics has not improved even after she has grown to be an adult. She realized that as long as she is not married, she is always a child in her parents' eyes and the way they deal with sex will remain the style of when she was in high school.

One day my mom read a news story about a girl's abortion in newspaper. She passed the newspaper to me and commented, "[Look at] the society nowadays!" I cast a look at the headline of the story and said to her confidently, "Don't worry, Mom. I'm a girl with self-respect." She was pleased and that was the end of our discussion.

I asked the woman if she really thinks a girl's self-respect is associated with her sexual behavior. She said, "Of course not. But that's the language I use with my

parents. That's how they talk." The incident this informant provides implies a communication gap between the two generations in which the discourse of sex is missing. Instead, the discourse of virtue, a girl's self-respect in this case, is applied. The daughter is perfectly aware of this pattern, so she verbally caters to her mother's expectation in order to save the trouble of going further in a discussion which she is not interested in having with her mother.

Not only parents do not know how to talk about sex with their children, teachers in school are no more motivated to take up the task. I interviewed an elementary teacher while she was waiting to have a gynecology checkup. She was thirty-one years old, planning to have a baby. She was a head teacher of a fifth-grade class. We talked about sex education in school. She said,

You may not know, but nowadays kids get physically mature very early. Almost all of the girls in my class have their menstrual period already, with only one or two exceptions. Sometimes they don't have sanitary napkins with them and I always prepare some in my office. We don't have sex education in the curricular of my school. I heard about some elementary schools that are trying. That's good. However, I still think it's primarily the parents' responsibility to teach their children about sex. They can't just leave everything for the school. Sex is such a private topic, it's not appropriate to teach in school. "Infiltrative education (shentou jiaoyu 渗透教育)" should be given by the parents. (What's "infiltrative education?") It's an informal way to teach. I see many of my pupils don't know anything. I am very concerned. (Do you teach them about sex?) I'm afraid very little. You see, as a teacher, what I can do is very limited.

It is not new for us to see teachers and parents throwing the ball to each other. Both parties insist that the other party bears greater responsibility in educating the next generation. In the case of sex education, it seems to me that parents and teachers are playing a game called "who speaks first loses." They are waiting for the other party to speak to the children first because neither of them have a good idea about what is sex education and how to carry it out.

It occurred to me that the former incident I provided between a daughter and her mother may be considered as “infiltrative education” – to remind the daughter of “self-respect” based on a news story about abortion. It is an informal way to teach, but what message does it convey and how informative can it be? I consider the lack of sex education in China as teachers and parents’ “lies of silence” to the children. They are preventing the children from receiving information about sex, although it doesn’t mean the children can’t learn from other channels. In the age of information explosion, these lies are actually not preventing the children from being exposed to sex or any harm the parents imagine their children will get from the information.

In this section, I explored women’s motive to lie and their strategies of lying to their families. Whether a woman lies to protect her family from the courtesy stigma of her abortion experience or she lies for the fear of punishment, she is aware that there is an image of a good daughter to maintain. And regarding this image, the discourse of virtue has taken place of the discourse of sex. When a woman fails to obey her parents to keep herself away from premarital sex, at least she can pay a lip service to her parents’ teaching by lying. And when they had failed her parents badly by having abortions, they think preventing parents from knowing is a way of being responsible, just like their parents prevent them from knowing about sex in order to be responsible to them.

3.3 Lying to Men

3.3.1 A discussion on the Internet over lying

I suspect that all romantic relationships demand a certain degree of “information control” and “impression management”, at least in the beginning. What makes lying about one’s past abortions different from lying about other information, say, one’s family background or economical condition, is that a sexual misconduct is not negotiable. The confession of her past abortion will either fatally threaten the relationship, or, place the woman in a highly vulnerable situation.

Discussions over deception often appear in the women’s discussion on the Internet. Such discussions usually start with how to hide an abortion from certain people. When one woman brings up the issue, the other women will offer useful tips from their own experiences. The motive for or the action of deception is never questioned. There is tacit agreement among them that lying is necessary. Women

with abortion experiences generally believe that the outsiders to such an experience would not understand their need to deceive. I once suggested to a woman that she tell her parents and was criticized for not being supportive or understanding. When I once suggested a confession to the man, I was immediately bombarded with criticism for being ridiculous, out of my mind, and absolutely inconsiderate. Among the women with abortion experiences, it's never "whether to lie" that deserves discussion but "how to lie."

However, in some forums where all kinds of interested people visit,³⁵ different opinions about lying about one's abortion experience can be found. Here is an example. The original post was written by a woman to the other woman who shares an abortion past.

Some heart-to-heart words for women who've had an abortion:

...(skip the words on post-abortion care.)

Try your best to limit the persons that know. If you break up with him, after you recover from the abortion, destroy all the hospital receipts and other medical evidence to avoid problems for your future relationships.

If in the future another man loves you and wants to marry you, you can tell him that you have a past, but never tell him that you had abortions before. Trust me, no man doesn't mind. Do not tell even if you would be beaten to death.

If he heard about it from elsewhere and confronts you, do not admit it. Be selfish for yourself once. If you can no longer cover it, you can tell him it was not an abortion but just some gynecological problem. Because you were too shy to tell the truth, you inevitably made a mysterious impression on people. They guessed you went to hospital for an abortion but that was not true. And now you are fully recovered from your gynecological problem.

Are you listening to me? Do not admit it no matter what. You need to make your lie look real. Make a calm response to him with a smile. And tell him, "I'm waiting for you to bestow me my first baby." Never ask him who

³⁵ As forums have different administrators, the exclusiveness of membership is determined by the nature of the forums. Some forums are run by woman and only serve women of abortion experiences. They are afraid that outsiders would criticize them and make sure only sympathetic members can have access to the forums. Other forums are less exclusive and are open for everyone. Therefore posts of different opinions often initiate debates (not necessarily logical or polite) on those forums.

told him, how he knew, [because] that's equivalent to telling him that you are nervous, and therefore indicating the answer.

Perhaps some people will say this is immoral. Huh, morality is just to serve people's appetite for empty discussions, rumors and gossip. Real life is for yourself. Don't be stupid.

Don't dream of men's acceptance. Past experiences tell us: fantasy is only to trap women. Be tough, be rational, take good care of yourself and it's time to start anew.

Following the original post, there were dozens of responses from women. Despite many that express sheer appreciation to the author and her post in a grateful tone, the following four responses I quote here are representative of other views in this discussion:

Response 1: Let me ask you. Some day you will be a parent and your son will get married. As a mother-in-law, when you find out your daughter-in-law has such a past and she cheated you, what would you think? Will you say it's ok? Will you understand her? I guess you won't. You don't hope other people lie to you but you teach them to lie to others. That's the behavior of a shameless hypocrite. Everyone should face the consequence of their choices. If not, she is a person with no sense of responsibility.

Response 2: To cheat because one was cheated. That's not to start anew, but to reproduce evil. Now that you were hurt by a man, instead of hurting him back, you make another innocent man suffer the consequence. How can you do that? What kind of person are you?

Response 3: What are you talking about? [To have] an abortion makes a woman bad? [It] makes her undeserving of happiness? What do you mean by innocent men suffering consequences? What consequence does he suffer? When you chase a woman you think you can take in everything about her. But when she tells you about her past abortion, all your beautiful vows go sour. How many men will say they don't mind? I suspect none. I guess you will move right on to seek your innocent girl. In this way you hurt women

who've already been hurt, and keep on hurting other girls. Men always require women to be chaste, but how about themselves? If men can get pregnant like women, only God knows how many abortions you guys have already had! We lie to protect mutual happiness [between us and men], what can men lose?

Response 4: I am not sure. I'm a fool, for I told him [about my past abortion] since we started. However, now I've had another abortion, and this time for him (爲了他). Am I insane? Because now I finally feel I owe him nothing. Maybe we women with abortion experience really don't deserve to be happy. It's too difficult for us.

I quote this discussion at length because I think it is a brilliant demonstration of how ideas about women lying to men about their abortion experience are contested in discussions on the Internet. Voices of accusation and justification are among public opinions. However, most of the responses support the original post. The article was posted on a forum under the theme of abortion. Since the forum mostly attracts women who have abortion experiences or are about to have one, I assume this explains why more people support the original post.

The article, written by a woman with abortion experience provided detailed instructions on how to lie and why to lie. According to her instruction, we can see that it involves four steps to successfully lie to a man about one's abortion past: denial, omission, fabrication, and distraction. First, one should destroy the physical evidence and firmly deny this experience if confronted by the man. Secondly, when denial fails to convince, omission of the story is required – to admit having been to the gynecology department but deny the rest of the accusation. Closely following omission comes fabrication: a reason to see the gynecologist other than abortion. And finally, she suggests the distraction: to be calm, to smile, and to say sweet words. Don't be nervous or ask irrelevant questions; don't be overly defensive, because that's "indicating the answer." And as we know, "an innocent face hides more than a lying tongue." Therefore, the most important thing is to deny and stick to the lie, no more, no less. The use of the word "bestow" is a vivid example of showing how to play sweet in front of a man to avoid a potential conflict.

In spite of teaching women the lying skills in detail, the author further justifies women's lying on this matter as politically correct and practically necessary by stating two facts: one, all men mind his girlfriend's abortion past; and two, the woman has a life to live. The author is so concerned about women being soft and emotional that she repeats and emphasizes the motto of "do not admit" in every paragraph. She hopes through lying, women will not be stigmatized by their abortion experience and will have a chance "to start anew".

Response 1 is not necessarily from a man. The idea in this response is that a woman's integrity and sense of responsibility is in question when she lies, no matter what she lies about. This person maintains that abortion is a choice a woman herself makes and therefore she is obliged to face the consequence of her behavior. It serves her right if she is to suffer from discrimination and punishment. A responsible woman will never try to escape. An interesting point of this response is that it assumes the mother-in-law to be among the people who will discriminate against a woman's abortion past. Being a woman is not enough to understand another woman's problem.

Response 2 seems to have put himself in the deceived man's shoes. It places the deceived man into the victim's position and accuses the lying woman of "reproducing evil." Moving on to a new romantic relationship, according to this response, is a woman unfairly making "an innocent man suffer the consequences." In the light of this statement, the woman is a damaged good and should never seek another relationship at all.

Response 3 is obviously defending the original post. Despite an overly emotional tone, it presses powerful questions to point out the unfair charges in Response 1 and 2. It shows awareness of a double standard against women regarding sexual experience, and indignantly foresees that men will only leave when they know their girlfriend had an abortion for another man. Furthermore, it claims that men lose nothing in such a lie, and mutual happiness between the two parties is protected by the lie. For the sake of saving other "innocent girls" from being hurt, as well as the reasons mentioned above, women do no wrong by lying about their abortion past to keep their romantic relationship.

Response 4 is also from a woman, but it's in a completely powerless tone. Her confession of her abortion past did not cause her boyfriend to abandon her but it didn't make her romantic relationship a happy one either. She always had the feeling

of owing him something until she had an abortion for him. She is unsure about what to do to achieve happiness. And she blames herself for her failure.

In this section I have shown that women believe they need to conceal their past abortion experience to men (if they don't, other women will persuade them to conceal with evidences of those women's own painful experiences). Therefore, the remaining question is how to lie. Where there is a need, there is a market. In the next section, I will introduce an industry designed to cater for women's need to lie.

3.3.2 An Industry to Help Women Lie

The two most common types of hospitals in Guangzhou are public hospitals and private-owned clinics. Public hospitals, long supported by the government, have the authoritative credibility and enjoy the biggest market share. They are not allowed to advertise, nor do they need to. Their legitimacy and qualification are self-evident in their sizes, their histories, and even in their names. "The Provincial People's Hospital of Guangdong", "The First Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-sen University", "Guangzhou Red Cross Hospital"... for these hospitals, they just need to open the door and the patients will march in.

On the contrary, privately-owned clinics have just started their businesses. Since 1949 the state had started to take over privately-owned hospitals. During the 1960s, private-owned clinics and hospitals had completely disappeared. Although the government altered its policy in 1980 and allowed privately-owned clinics to reappear, it was in the 1990s when such clinics started to thrive, with an enormous amount of advertisements in streets and the mass media. Due to limited resources, privately-owned clinics are limited in size, equipment and professional staff. As they are completely independent of the government, they are market-oriented and only open departments that make money.

Doctors at public hospitals generally care less about making profit than those of privately-owned hospitals. Consider the case of painless abortion for example. Since the surgery is more profitable than regular abortions, all of the doctors from the two privately-owned hospitals I visited strongly recommended it. However, most of the doctors in public hospitals suggested regular abortions. They said that although it's less comfortable to have a regular abortion surgery, it's actually safer and more economical than a painless one. The idea of painless abortion is fancier than what it really is.

In addition to abortions, both public and private-owned hospitals offer gynecological plastic surgeries. According to the staff, hymen repair is the most popular among all the gynecological plastic surgeries offered. Its customers are unanimously young women in their twenties. Hospitals are more than happy to offer these surgeries because they are comparatively simple and safe while extremely profitable. To see how profitable these surgeries are, consider the words of a doctor from a public hospital.

The cost for a hymen repair is about 100 yuan or less. It's just a few stitches in the vagina with a little use of anesthetic, simple and fast. But the price for such a surgery is about 3,000 yuan in our hospital. Because it's a plastic surgery, the State Administration of Prices won't make trouble to the hospital regarding our pricing policy. All plastic surgeries are like that. It's not the actual cost that determines the prices of these surgeries. Rather, it's the "added value (附加值 fujia zhi)" that matters. To tell you an anecdote, once, a colleague of mine was warned by the hospital official for giving someone a hymen repair without charging the official price. I guess that patient must be her acquaintance. She only charged the patient 100 yuan. It made the hospital management very mad.

Despite the shocking insider information about the hymen repair business, this doctor's comment makes a good point: it isn't the cost, but the added value [of the surgery] that matters in the pricing policy regarding plastic surgeries. In other words, it's the market that determines how much a commodity (or a service) is. A hymen repair surgery that costs about 100 yuan can sell at the price of 3,000 yuan at a public hospital, only because the customers are willing to pay that much to have one. They must think it worthwhile when they pay for it. So what do they think can they gain from a hymen repair surgery? To be exact, what do they think can they gain from virginity?

Compared to the public hospitals' low profile in their marketing strategy, privately-owned hospitals do not hesitate to advertise and brag about this "added value." Their words sound pretty candid and practical. They think in a woman's

shoes. And they are trying to help. Let me quote some from the website of a privately-owned hospital:

“Nowadays, men want to marry virgin women, while they require having sex with their girlfriends. As a woman, what should you do? Here is a perfect solution...”

“Not every virgin bleeds on their first night, but with our edging technology, you will definitely bleed, more real than a real virgin!”

“Although a hymen repair surgery operates in the body, the effect of such a surgery is psychological. Women feel enormous psychological support after they receive the surgery...”

Hymen repair is an extreme case. It is only used by women who date different men. in Goffman’s term, they are the women’s “bibliographical others”. These men don’t know the women’s pasts. Thus a woman can use a hymen repair to manage her spoiled virginity. Because hymen repair is a painful, expensive, and utterly unnecessary surgery, one’s choosing to have such a surgery can be interpreted in two contrasting ways. One way is to view it as a woman’s ultimate and complete surrender to the male power in requiring virgin wives. A hymen repair surgery is the physical cost a woman pays to cater to her future husband. The other way is to view it as a woman’s “weapon of the weak”: by having her hymen repaired, a woman successfully turns discrimination against her into a weapon in her favor.

On the website of the above private-owned hospital I quote from, there is also “a true story” about a local young woman who had two hymen repair surgeries before she married a rich businessman. As the story goes:

Pre-marital cohabitation has become more and more commonplace nowadays. Once a cohabitant relationship doesn’t result in marriage, and the woman has to marry a different person, usually she will choose a hymen repair to cater to the man. For this reason, Miss Lu had been to the operation table twice.

Miss Lu, who lives in Haizhu District³⁶, was ready to break up with her long-time cohabiting boyfriend, Ar Jie, to marry a rich businessman from Hong Kong. Persuaded by her parents, who were also the match maker of this marriage, Miss Lu had a hymen repair operation, because her virginity on the wedding night can increase her value (“抬高身價 tai gao shenjia”). However, after a month, the businessman didn’t come to marry her as planned. Miss Lu couldn’t stand the loneliness and moved back in with Ar Jie, her ex-boyfriend. When she was enjoying the good time with her old love, the businessman called to inform that the wedding would be carried out in a month. Thus Miss Lu went back to the hospital and had a second hymen repair surgery.

Although this story sounds rather dramatic, the idea promoted in such hymen repair advertisements is significant. First, it explicitly recognizes that cohabitation is commonplace and breakup for better happens. Secondly, it suggests that when women marry a different man, they can benefit from hymen repair surgeries in the marriage market, because “virginity on the wedding night can increase her value.” It has been an ancient theme that a bride needs to bleed on her wedding night. What’s new in these advertisements is now virginity has become an extra benefit rather than a necessity. What’s more, modern technology assures one will achieve it. If one hymen repair is not enough, you can have two – you can have as many times as you need. In this way the advertisement promotes the idea that a woman must adapt herself to discriminatory social norms before she can voice resistance. Contempt or deviance to the social norm of virginity does not help them obtain social acceptance, rather, it will indeed prevent them from obtaining a happy marriage in the future. Therefore, direct incorporation and protest is found to be too costly for the women. They are persuaded that the best resistance for them is to achieve a happy successful life without being influenced by a shameful past.

James Scott argues that powerless groups are rarely allowed the luxury of direct confrontation with the powerful and that they therefore resort to disguised resistance. He maintains that subordinate groups are usually subtle and that their ideological resistance is “disguised, muted, and veiled for safety’s sake (1990: 137).” For the women in my research, lying is their “disguised, muted, and veiled”

³⁶ Haizhu is a district in Guangzhou.

resistance for future happiness' sake. And they all agree that the highest resistance to discrimination on their abortion experience and spoiled virginity is to achieve a happy marriage like other women. In other words, the greatest victory a victim can achieve is to be not victimized by the stigma she possesses, even if it sometimes requires a little plastic work.

Another message implicated in the accessibility to these medical services is that lying is openly accepted by the society. Moreover, it is the norm. It is very hard to find an unmarried single mother. On the contrary, abortion clinics mushroom in the city. Early sexual maturity coupled with late marriage is the main lifestyle of the time. At the same time, men are still dreaming about marrying virgins. The moral image is maintained in the fake virginity of the women through widely accessible medical services. The advertisement's observation is very true: although such a surgery operates in the body, the effect is psychological. It's really the mind that needs plastic surgery, not the body.

3.4 Conclusion: Resistance and Accommodation in Lying

I'm afraid that abortion is just one more "dirty little secret" about the way sex is treated by the Chinese society. Parents and teachers lie to the children by posing a censorship on sex related topics. Children lie to their parents and teachers on their sexual behaviors to keep up with an ideal innocent image in front of the powerful seniors. They all know that the society is not that innocent, but the parents simply don't think those unconventional things will happen to their children. Aware of such an expectation, the children volunteer to cooperate by lying.

The motive for women to lie to men as they move on to a new romantic relationship is more selfish than their motive to lie to their family. Due to men's strong discrimination against women's past abortions, women need to be very careful about information control of their past. If she doesn't lie to the man and tells him, she is very likely to lose him or at least their love relationship will be severely harmed. If she lies to him, she suffers a sense of isolation and a fear of exposure deep in her heart.

One lie often requires another, and another. Lying often begets more lying, if we are to keep the original lie from being discovered. I find that it is not merely the chain reaction of lies that disturbs the women in my research. It is not the lies that

they are trying to keep from being discovered. What's really promoting this lying behavior is the domino effect a pre-marital pregnancy causes. The lies I study in this chapter result from a woman trying to confirm: because she is not allowed to be pregnant without being married, she resorts to having an abortion; because an abortion is shameful for unmarried women, she chooses not to tell; and because an abortion past is not accepted, she chooses to lie throughout her life. Unfortunately, having had abortion is something like carrying a criminal record. It is an unremovable stain. She just can't wash it off. And she doesn't know when it will be discovered and she is never sure about what reaction people will have.

Lying is part of the "moral career" of every woman with a stigmatized abortion experience. It shows her commitment to adjust herself into a society that discriminates against her sexual experience. She lies because in most cases she is strongly aware of the unfairness she faces. However, the irony is that these lies often serve to reinforce traditional gender relations. The more she lies, the more she conforms to people's expectations for women, and the more she promotes the double standard that suppresses women's sexual freedom. Lying about her abortion past is to cater for her present male partner's psychological need of monopoly of her body, which prevents her from having a relationship of emotional and sexual equality with the man.

Eventually, the greatest irony may lie in dealing with her inner self. How does she settle with her abortion past? If we regard the fetus as being once part of her, how does she settle with that part of her she aborted? In the next chapter, these questions will be addressed.

Chapter 4: Loss: Bodily Experiences and Verbal Strategies

In previous chapters I've shown that when unmarried women face an abortion their pressing concerns are their romantic relationships and their families. In this chapter I will focus on women's reflections on their bodily experiences and also study the verbal strategies they apply when they justify their decision to abort. My research questions are: What are their views of the fetus? How do they think about abortion? What have they learned from their abortion experiences? In this chapter, we will see that when discussing these topics, the women's accounts are a mix of mythical, scientific, filial, and love discourses. They have literally employed all that they know to justify their choice and to make sense of their abortion experiences. Through practicing these verbal strategies, some women successfully recovered from the negative influence of abortion and moved on. However, many more women found that some feelings were impossible to overcome. As I have shown in chapter 1, abortion is a less politically controversial issue for Chinese women than for women from cultures and societies with strong religious traditions. But it doesn't mean that they are without conflicting feelings and emotional problems when encounter an abortion. This chapter will explore women's inner conflicts and sentiments.

4.1 Women's Perceptions towards Fetus Life

When people outside of China learn about this research, they like to ask me, "Do those women you interviewed think the fetus is a life?" It instills great caution and requires effort to answer this question, for I prefer to give the questioners details of women's reflections and contrasting individual cases for them to judge for themselves. Nie Jing-Bao, the author of so far the first and only published book on Chinese women's abortion experiences, defends Chinese people's morality by showing his western readers the women's voices that believe the fetus is a life, and his women informants maintained that it was bitter experience for them to abort.

My informants are generally younger than Nie's informants, and they are not married. I noticed that for young unmarried women in China, whether or not the fetus is a life is not what matters when they decide to have an abortion. In most of cases, even if women acknowledge that the fetus is a human life, such an

acknowledgement would not change their mind about having an abortion. “It’s a life, so what?” would be a common response. Women are confused about the implication of acknowledging a human life. In the social context of China, the meaning of a fetus life is missing in mainstream discourses. Because discussion of fetus life will bring complications to the implementation of birth control policy, the state does not encourage people to think or talk about this topic. It would rather allow the topic to remain ambiguous. As Nie observed, “the widespread acceptance of abortion is something not easily achieved, and the lack of significant resistance to the party line is a result of painstaking propaganda” (2005: 31). As an important birth-control method, abortion is widely believed in China to serve the greater good of the nation. That is, the well being of the country with a less severe population burden.

Discourses on the fetus are discouraged and restrained by the state. At the same time, discourses on how to be an appropriate woman are powerful and specific. A woman in her teens and twenties has a list of priorities: to achieve educational success, to be a filial daughter, to find a job, to marry properly with a decent man, and to raise a perfect only child³⁷. She is expected to unmistakably fulfill these tasks step by step. Motherhood is a luxurious and inappropriate talk for an unmarried young woman, let alone for a teenage girl. It’s hard for her to celebrate the coming of a new life under such circumstances, because a pregnancy is only honorable and commendable for married couples who are looking forward to having a baby. Otherwise, it’s rather embarrassing, abstract, and vague. For a married woman, abortion may be a struggle because her family’s interest may be in conflict with the state. In contrast, for a young unmarried woman, there may be little struggle on this issue: her family is standing on the same side as the state on this matter. Terminating an ill-timed pregnancy is for the greater good for her, her family, her boyfriend – everyone. It takes a strict and powerful state policy to control a married woman’s reproductive decisions. To control an unmarried woman, social norms and the family power are good enough.

Being greatly influenced by a strong state discourse that underplays the complexity and confusion of this issue at personal level, how do unmarried women construct a discourse regarding their fetus? Is it a human life? If so, what does a

³⁷ Since the late 1990s, as the central authority altered the population and family planning policy, regulations issued by provincial authorities have gradually allowed couples who were born singleton children to give birth to two children. However, if one parent is an only child while the other one is not, they are still restricted to have only one child.

human life mean to them? If not, what is a fetus? During my research, I've learned not to bring up this topic in the first place. I was not sure how women would respond to my questions, and if they would take it as my intention to judge. As I became more experienced in interviews, I found that when I started this topic after a good warm-up, women are willing to touch this uncomfortable topic.³⁸ I also credit the success of interviews to my choice of using Internet as the media. It gives time and space for the women to think and respond to my questions without feeling pressured to come up with a quick and politically right answer.

In the following sections we will see that most women don't have a clear definition of the life of a fetus. It is a rather flexible and contextual idea which they apply multiple discourses to construct depending on bodily experience, romantic relationships, education, and many other factors.

4.1.1 The fetus is a human life.

In this section we will see women with strong feelings towards their fetuses. They treat the fetus as a human life, give it a name, assume it has a sex, buy it a souvenir, and write it letters. They do these things with sincerity and they think of the fetus a lot. They feel sorry for having an abortion and hope the fetus will understand their situation and forgive their choices.

When I asked about her view regarding the life of a fetus, a 20-year-old university student told me in an assured way that she thought that fetus is a human life:

(* M stands for me; S stands for student)

M: Do you think the fetus is a life?

S: Definitely. Don't you think so?

M: I'm not sure. I've read books with different opinions.

S: But there are a lot of things that can't be judged by theories. I think feelings are very important.

38 In this chapter, all interviews are conducted through the Internet. As I've shown in Chapter 3, for young unmarried women, an abortion experience is a closeted experience. When they feel like confiding, online chat-rooms give them a sense of community as well as protection. I also quoted some words from anonymous women from the Internet. Some of my informants found their online diaries during the time of abortion, and sent them to me to read. Those diaries are also posted anonymously on the Internet.

M: Then tell me when you started to *feel* that it was a life.

S: When I couldn't eat. I wanted to eat but couldn't swallow. I felt drowsy but couldn't sleep well. I felt very uncomfortable and that was when I felt it was a life.

M: Isn't it natural to want to get rid of something that made you feel so uncomfortable?

S: No. This is different. It's a way he communicates with me. I'll be fine after just a couple of months.

M: Communicate? Did you feel anything other than those symptoms?

S: No. I only felt uncomfortable.

M: We feel uncomfortable for many other reasons, for example when we get sick. What makes you think this uncomfortable feeling is a life?

S: Because there is no medication to cure it. It's just a process, a process of conception (一個孕育的過程).

She was one of the few women I interviewed who described their bodily feelings with great articulation and thoughtful interpretation. I was amazed by her deep thinking and discursive creativity on the fetus life talk. However, as we went further on this topic, she impressed me in other ways.

This woman had experienced three abortions but she didn't feel the same way about the life of her fetus every time. According to her, her first abortion at the age of 17 was the time she strongly felt that the fetus was a human life (the above conversation was referring to that time). Her feeling about her second abortion was the overwhelming surgical pain she suffered from, because she had to go through a vacuum suction after a failed drug-induced abortion. Regarding her third abortion, which occurred only ten months before she was interviewed, she could remember neither the exact date nor any specific feelings. As she explained, "This time, knowing everything about it, I chose to have a painless abortion to save the trouble. So I didn't feel much and I don't quite remember."

At first, this woman's contradicting words struck me as odd. If she believed a fetus is a human life – and she convinced me with her powerful interpretations, why didn't she apply the same principle to her other two abortions and feel the same for those two fetuses? Didn't she count them as human lives? However, on second

thought I started to understand. This woman judged this issue by her feelings; therefore, there was no solid definition of life for her. She could argue for the fetus being a human life by interpreting her bodily feelings, and she could argue against it in the same way. Moreover, according to her, admitting the fetus is a life doesn't mean an abortion is killing, and admitting a killing doesn't mean it's evil or sinful. She has the greater good to consider: her family and her own good. When I pointed out that her current contraceptive method³⁹ was not safe, she insisted on her own way. She told me that she wouldn't consider having a baby as long as she hadn't graduated from university, even if it meant she would have to go through a fourth abortion.

Women not only think the fetus is a human life, but also talk to the fetus. A young woman posts an anonymous apology on the Internet for her aborted fetus. I find it a common way for them to vent their emotions:

I feel so bad. My baby has been in my womb for 15 weeks. I seem to feel his hiccups and heart beats. But his papa and grandma don't want him. I feel so grieved. His papa hasn't even said a word of apology to me. My baby is a very good baby. He never makes Mama suffer. During these months, Mama has no reactions like the other pregnant women have. Dear baby, you haven't made Mama suffer a single day. But your papa doesn't want you, your grandma doesn't want you, so no matter how much Mama wants you, you still have to go. Do you know that Mama has given you a name? It's Shao Xiaozhi (邵小痔, Little Hemorrhoids Shao). When your papa asked Mama why I give you such a name, Mama said to papa coldly, "Because this baby is like the nevus in your body, you really need to get rid of it, don't you!" Dear baby, you are Mama's first baby. Mama loves you so much. Mama is sorry.

³⁹ The student and I had a long discussion on contraceptive methods. As she recalled, her boyfriend and she mainly used the withdrawal method until her first unintended pregnancy happened. After that they used condoms more often but condoms caused her gynecological problems. So they quit condoms and she became pregnant a second time. Since then they mainly relied on the rhythm method. Although the rhythm method had failed her once and caused her third pregnancy, the girl blamed the failure on her miscalculation and stuck to it. She said her menstrual period had always been predictable and "cooperative." She refused to take contraceptive pills because "all chemical things are bad." She refused to use IUD (the physical method I suggested) because she hadn't had children yet and IUD impressed her as a method for married women with children. "IUD sounds so 'birth planning policy.' It's for middle-aged mothers and rural women." She commented with naughty smiley faces (we chatted on the Internet).

This woman's post had attracted dozens of women to follow her example and to post apologies to their fetus on the Internet anonymously. Although I didn't have a chance to interview her, there are three characteristics in her behavior that I found representative of some of my informants' cases. First is to give a name to the aborted fetus. I regard such an act as acknowledging and assuming a life⁴⁰. Secondly is to constantly talk in third person addressing herself and her boyfriend as the fetus' mama and papa. I regard this act as a demonstration of the woman's strong sense (or hope) of establishing a relationship with the fetus. Thirdly is to blame other people for her abortion and express her love for the fetus in contrast to the coldness of those people. By doing so, the woman felt herself on the same side with her fetus, although she complied with those people by having an abortion.

The woman in this case gave a funny name to her fetus. She called the fetus "little hemorrhoids", which was not likely to be a formally-used name, thus implying the fetus has no place in reality. She gave the fetus the man's family name, acknowledging (and emphasizing) the unborn baby's having a blood tie with the man. By naming the fetus in such a weird way, the woman filed her grievance and complaint to her boyfriend. But despite an awkward name, she could not afford to give her fetus anything more.

A high school girl told me that she bought a pair of pink baby stockings after she had an abortion and put the stockings beside her pillow. Living with her family, only she knew what the stockings represented. She assumed the fetus was a girl to express her tender feelings for the unborn baby. Due to the stigmatized nature of premarital pregnancy, women are restrained in expressing their feelings to the fetus. Many women chose not to have any reminder at all. My informants told me that when they felt really bad, they resorted to making an anonymous confession and apology on the Internet. It brought them a little sense of relief. Gradually they ceased to return to these abortion-theme chat-rooms and bulletin boards on the Internet.

Women think a fetus is a human life only when they are allowed to by the circumstance. In her diary on the Internet, a 25-year-old woman reflected on her

⁴⁰ When people give a name to a lifeless object, I think they are imagining that it is a live being or they are thinking of the object as if it has feelings.

second abortion, when she strongly felt it was a life and was against aborting the fetus⁴¹.

I didn't feel much for my first abortion. I didn't have time to feel. But this time, it was very different. When I found out I was pregnant it was in the morning. I thought, "What a bad luck!" However, my thoughts changed greatly by noon. My friends have already become mothers, while I'm still waiting for him to marry me. He would never understand my feelings. He cannot understand the pain of being a woman. When he learned I was pregnant, he scheduled a date on which he was free to go to the hospital with me. So he wanted to kill the baby again. But this time I could totally feel the baby. I protected my baby out of instinct. I protected him all the time. I couldn't ignore his existence. I watched my step; I didn't spend long in front of the computer screen; I made myself swallow even though I didn't have the appetite to eat at all. One day when I was on a crowded bus, I even instinctively put my hands on my womb to protect the baby. However, after all this, I just felt like an idiot. All that I did was meaningless. What's the point of fearing the radiation and the crowd? He would have been a lump of blood and flesh in a few days anyway. But I couldn't resist my instinct. I hated him⁴² for making me go through this.

What difference did her second pregnancy make? Did she feel nothing for the fetus on her first abortion just for a mere lack of time? I don't think so. I think it was because she was 25 years old when she had her second pregnancy and her friends have already become mothers so she allowed and encouraged herself to pay attention to her bodily feelings and to imagine it was a little baby. When she had her first abortion, she was a 21-year-old college student. Her boyfriend was from her college. She agreed with her boyfriend at the time that they couldn't and shouldn't have the baby. However, now that they both have jobs, they can get married for the sake of her pregnancy. She is keen to get married and to be a mother just like her women

⁴¹ When I interviewed this woman through online chatting, she sent me an anonymous blog she wrote and posted on the Internet for me to read.

⁴² Here "him" refers to her boyfriend. Although she uses the same him ("ta 他") in her blog to refer to both her unborn baby and her boyfriend, it doesn't confuse the readers because it's easy to tell her different emotions to the two him's.

friends. But her boyfriend disagrees and is not yet prepared to turn a new page of life with her. She was greatly disappointed. The more eagerly she wants to marry the man, the more carefully she seeks evidence of the fetus' life. Guarding her fetus was to guard her reason for marriage. Unfortunately, such a reason was not good enough to make the man comply.

From the examples I give in this section we have come to understand that in a social context without religious teaching in mainstream discourses, women are convinced that the fetus is a human life by their bodily feelings, instincts, and imagination. It is also closely related to their interactions with the baby's father. There is no concrete definition regarding this issue. Hence a woman can decide that in one abortion her fetus is a human life while in another it isn't. In the next section we will see some other opinions of women on this issue.

4.1.2 The fetus is anything but a human life.

The simple procedure and wide availability for abortion shorten the time for women to consider their decisions and sometimes an abortion impressed them as a mere medical experience. In reflection they may talk to me at great length portraying themselves as people who loved children; however, at the time when facing an abortion, their attention was focused on problem solving, on how they could arrange to terminate the pregnancy with the least damage and cost.

A: I had an ultrasound scan today. The doctor says the embryo is too small for operation. Can anyone tell me about what a drug abortion is like?

B: Yes. I just had one lately. It was okay. I am still bleeding a little and taking antiseptics.

C: Lucky you! I was bleeding like hell last time. It was like couldn't turn off the tap. I thought I was going to die.

A: Wow, you scare me.

B: Don't worry. You will be fine. It's just that if you don't fully discharge the tissue, you will need a vacuum suction operation. It depends on luck. I think if you can wait for a few more days to have a painless abortion, it would be the least painful.

A: But I can't wait any more days.

C: Then take the pills. I survived. So will you.

This kind of discussion is the most frequent to happen on the Internet. When women are focusing on how to solve the problem, they apply a scientific and medical discourse, and use words such as “tissue (組織, zuzhi)”, “embryo (胚胎, peitai)”, to refer to the fetus. They discuss the color of their post-abortion blood to decide whether they are recovering properly or need to go back to the hospital for a check-up. They compare the prices they paid for their abortions, the attitudes of doctors, and so on. In the context of these discussions, women are rational and goal-oriented. They may fear the physical pain and ask around how painful it could be, but they don't mourn the loss of their babies at the same time. Hardly any women will bring up the fetus life, or “my-poor-little-baby” talk on such occasions.

I noticed that the clinical experiences of abortion often forced women to observe other women and be affected by them. A university student reported to me that her abortion experience was impressive because of a scene she happened to see:

I was prescribed a drug abortion. I took the first two doses of medication at home. The doctor required me to go to the hospital to take the third dose of medication, for it was the time when the fetus was supposed to drop. There were a lot of people in the gynecology department. Some were there for an abortion like I was. The doctor gave each of us a plastic basin and instructed us to go to the toilet when we felt something dropping from inside. She would come to check the aborted tissue in the basin and decide if a vacuum suction operation was necessary. So when I felt ready, I squatted over the plastic basin and waited for the fetus to drop. I didn't feel anything for my fetus. It was just blood and some unidentifiable stuff. I even felt lucky because I didn't have to wait too long for it to drop like some other women did. But when I saw the tissue in an older woman's basin in the toilet, I was horrified. I could actually see the fetus' little hands and feet and I even saw its little face! Can you imagine that? I will never forget that scene. It was so scary.

This woman had no difficulty denying her aborted tissues as a human life, but when she encountered the scene of another woman's aborted fetus, she was shocked. It was in the middle of the night when she told me this part of her experience. Scaring

herself as she talked, she abruptly stopped going into any more details about what she saw at the hospital. It was difficult for her to deny a fetus' life when confronted with a human form. But personally she really didn't feel too much about her own fetus. She was confused and scared. The bloody scene troubled her for a long time. Then she asked, "Do you believe in 'ying ling (嬰靈)',⁴³?" Although we were doing the interview through the Internet, I sensed that she was very nervous when she asked that question, plus she was going too far on the topic and disturbing herself in the middle of the night. So I consoled her that the idea of "ying ling" was nonsense and suggested a change of topic before we ended the interview that night.

As we see, women's perceptions towards the issue of whether a fetus is a human life vary greatly in the social context of China. Their perceptions not only differ individually but also change occasionally. It's unlikely that people in Chinese society will polarize into two camps to argue on life and choice. In the next section, I will explore the most common myths regarding the fetus.

4.2 Verbal Strategies

Besides whether it is a human life or not, women have attached other meanings to the fetus. They seek explanations and they frequently apply certain verbal strategies to make sense of their abortion experiences. In this section I will discuss the three most common referenced terms: "yuan fen (緣分)", "ying ling (嬰靈)", and "aiqing de jiejing (愛情的結晶)."

4.2.1 "Yuan fen (緣分)" (fate)

To explain what is "yuan fen," I find Kevin Miller has made a good try:

The Chinese have a concept called "yuan fen," for which no direct translation exists in the English language. It is a visual, contextual combination of destiny, tried-and-true effort and, well, luck. Yuan fen, like so many things Chinese, is almost a karmic phrase meant to illustrate the importance of fate in our lives.

⁴³ "Ying ling" refers to the spirit of an infant. I'll discuss it in the second section of this chapter.

Although “yuan fen” is a term mostly used in explaining romantic relationships, it is actually a universal term to describe the predestinarianism in all kinds of relationships. In Chinese, “yuan fen” is often a passive and comforting idea for things unexplainable or too complicated to explain. It implies a greater power in control rather than human force, which is beyond understanding. When two people have “yuan”, they meet each other. If they also have “fen”, they belong to each other and stay in a relationship. People combine “yuan” and “fen” together into a convenient term to use.

“Yuan fen” was a handy concept many of my informants applied when they explained to themselves the reason why they could fulfill a mother-child relationship with the fetus. I often encountered this verbal strategy in their apologetic words to the fetus. Here I quote from two young women’s anonymous blogs where they wrote some words for their aborted fetuses:

Dear baby, it’s not that I don’t want you. It’s not that I don’t love you. It’s just that we don’t have “*yuan fen*” [to be mother and child]. I am sorry.

I believe that if we have “*yuan fen*”, we will be mother and child next time when I get pregnant.

We should be reminded that “yuan fen” is a neutral term. As I’ve shown, it can be used to explain both what has and has not happened. Why did women in my research use it to support their decision to abort rather than to give birth? In other words, why do they think they don’t have “yuan fen” with the aborted fetus rather than the other way round? This verbal strategy shows that young women don’t believe in forcing a mother-child relationship to happen when they are not allowed to be mothers by the society. A Catholic woman may believe that it’s unnatural to terminate a mother-child relationship by abortion, and her pregnancy is a sign of “God’s will,” which means it is determined for her to give birth to the fetus no matter what. However, for the women I interviewed, it’s obvious that terminating a pregnancy is more reasonable than giving birth. Being pregnant can still mean a lack of “yuen fen” between her and the fetus, and therefore justifies her choice of abortion. It might be the social norms, family power, boyfriend’s lack of cooperation that prevented her from carrying her pregnancy to term, but it was “yuan fen” that took the blame.

4.2.2 “Ying ling (嬰靈)” (the infant’s spirit)

The idea of “ying ling” suggests that every infant has a spirit. This idea has long been part of Chinese folk culture. It has become popular to apply the idea to the aborted fetus in Taiwan in recent years, and its popularity in Taiwan later influenced mainland China through the Internet. Although it is still officially debatable in Taoist and Buddhist beliefs whether the aborted fetus has a spirit or not, people in general feel uneasy to refute the idea with full confidence. Reincarnation is a concept closely related to infant spirit, and certain rituals are offered to help such a spirit to reincarnate. As many concepts are shared by both religions, with a fine line between religion and tradition, it’s not uncommon for Chinese people to apply Taoist rituals to practice a belief that’s rather Buddhist. I cannot do an anthropological research on the topic of baby’s spirit in this research; however, I observed that the idea that an aborted fetus has spirit was often mentioned, particularly in discussion on the Internet in both Taiwan and mainland China, as both places share the same cultural origin.

None of my informants could provide me a detailed explanation of “ying ling,”⁴⁴ nor did they perform any rituals for their aborted fetus, like people do in Taiwan and Japan. I don’t think my informants really believe in this idea. They only have pieces of ideas as well as a mysterious impression. None of them reported experiences of witnessing the spirit or serious haunting dreams that made them seek professional help. They think it’s superstitious; but at the same time, they think it’s hard to say. Thanks to the Communist government’s painstaking propaganda to “break all superstition” for over half a century, people in mainland China feel more confident to discharge any beliefs that they don’t like by categorizing them as superstition, and they may alter some beliefs by adding romantic elements into the version.

⁴⁴ A detailed version I heard from Taiwan is that every human being is assigned 60 years’ life in this world by a universal ruler. An abortion is to deprive a person’s assigned longevity by human force, which is to be condemned. Therefore, at the moment the fetus was aborted, its spirit becomes full of resentment. What’s more, because it has in a way already been transferred to this world, with its longevity unfulfilled, it cannot find a way back to reincarnate again. It is stuck in this world without a human form. Therefore it can’t do any good other than haunt the mother and related people. Resembling a baby’s temper, a “ying ling” is evil and unpredictable. Rituals are needed to help it return to where it comes from, thus resolving its resentment and the bad luck it brings.

This was exactly what my informants did to the belief of “ying ling.” Hardly any women I interviewed believe that the existence of an unborn baby’s spirit is to punish the woman – if it exists at all. They tend to think that the spirit will understand their situation and will forgive them. Even if it doesn’t forgive their choice, it should be wise enough to know who bares a greater fault and to punish those people rather than the woman – because she “didn’t have a choice.” What’s more, taking after an infant, a “ying ling” is cute and adorable in many women’s imagination. They imagine that the spirit may even come back to the woman’s womb again when the time is right. Many of my informants had sincerely prayed for its return, or made promises to the spirit that next time she would bring it into this world and fulfill her obligation of being its mother with all her heart. By doing so women not only begged for forgiveness but also hoped to secure their chance to be pregnant again.

4.2.3 “*Aiqing de jiejing* (愛情的結晶)” (the crystal/fruit of love)

As I have shown in Chapter 2, for many women, the man’s reaction is what concerned them most. A woman in love often uses the metaphor “the fruit of love (愛情的結晶)” to refer to her fetus. Her deep sentimental attachment to the fetus is an extension of her love to the man who impregnated her. As they told me, “Of course I love my baby, it’s from the man I am deeply in love with; it’s the crystal of our love.”

A young woman told me why she felt so sad when she went through an abortion:

The man broke up with me after my abortion. I always knew I loved him more than he loved me. I felt so bad because I didn’t want to break up with him. And you know, when the love is gone, you still want to grasp something. So I wanted to have the baby. It was the fruit of our love after all.

This is what happened to many women. It matters who is the father of the baby. She usually has no difficulty in arousing strong feelings for her fetus if it’s the crystal or fruit of her love with the man. However, such feelings are mixed and complicated. In this case, the woman knew she couldn’t make the man stay, but she wanted to keep

the baby, as a proof of their love. Unfortunately, soap operas hardly work in reality. Without the hope of getting married, this woman understood she could not afford to raise a child alone. She eventually had an abortion and accepted the fact that the man didn't love her enough to marry her.

I noticed that when the fetus is the fruit of love, women in a mutual love relationship actually feel less anguished in deciding to abort the fetus. If pregnancy is the fruit and romantic relationship the tree, these women believe that when they fail to harvest one fruit, as long as the man is there and the love is there, they will have another harvest again, and the fruit will only taste sweeter because the time will be right then. This woman said to her aborted fetus two years after her abortion:

Dear baby, Mama is getting married. I feel that the only person I owe is you. But don't you feel happy for Mama and Papa too? We are finally getting married. We will never forget you. Thank you and we are sorry.

This is a bittersweet message. There is more sweetness than bitterness because the woman is using "we" although she didn't write this message with her fiancé. At the moment as the woman reflects on her love story, the only imperfection is the abortion she had, thus she feels she owes no one but the fetus. Fortunately, her love story has a happy ending. She is getting married with the same man so that she doesn't need to lie about her abortion experience to him. She can say "thank you" and "sorry" to the fetus representing the two of them.

4.3 The Lessons Women Learn

What did women learn from their abortion experiences? For all of my informants, abortion was an experience which caused them to reflect on the fate of being a woman. They found their female body a great trouble and a lifelong burden. Confronted with the same realization that "men can walk away from sex, whereas women are slaves to their bodies (Kushner 1997: 45)"⁴⁵, some women toughened up while some softened up.

A woman told me indignantly:

⁴⁵ In *Experiencing Abortion*, Kushner collected 115 American women's accounts on their abortion experiences. This is a direct quote from a woman she interviewed.

His attitude made me believe that if he didn't want the baby, my insistence would be meaningless. I'm only hurting myself if I have the baby. During the three years of our relationship, I have had two abortions for him. The first time I aborted the baby without hesitation, because I knew we couldn't afford to have a baby. But the second time woke me up. Why should I always think of his good, when he only thinks of himself? I felt sorry for my baby. But thanks to it I finally had the determination to leave that man.

This woman was disillusioned by the man after her second pregnancy and abortion. The fetus is obviously in a secondary position in her consideration. It's an inspiration, a realization, a determination, and a sacrifice for her to have a good look at the man and at her relationship with him. Her words remind me of the words of parents when they are having a divorce and are negotiating who takes care of the child. The woman doesn't think she should be blamed for her abortion, because the man is more selfish than she is. I can't help thinking when people argue that a baby deserves to be born, why don't they argue with the same passion and resolution that a baby deserves to be loved and raised in a complete family?

A 20-year-old woman was interviewed five months after her abortion. She failed to enter university after high school, and had been doing small jobs now and then, here and there, for three years thereafter. She cohabited with the man for a year, during the time he impregnated her. According to her, the abortion made her realize that she needed to take care of herself.

I have learned to let it go. I shouldn't make myself carry a lifelong burden just because of a momentary thought (一時之念). It is laughable to choose to be a single mother for fear of the risk of sterility; it is ridiculous to sacrifice my future for so-called romantic love; it is extremely irresponsible to bring a child into this world when I'm unable to provide him a happy life. I know some people think abortion is inhuman. But am I treated humanely? They think they are great people for the reason that they think of the unborn and unconscious, but here I am, a live person. Have they ever thought of me? When I was on the operation table, it struck me that no one could replace me

there. After the abortion, there were many nights I sat against the wall on the corner of my bed, holding my knees in my arms, thinking to myself, “No one can take care of you, only yourself.”

Realizing the importance of having a career, this woman decided to leave the man and continue her education after recovering from the abortion. She told me that the man didn't leave a mark in her life for the abortion but for his motivation in his career. She had been fooling around after her educational failure. But the abortion made her realize that there were moments in her life when no one could take her place to deal with her problems. Therefore she learned to stop being childish and irresponsible, and started to get her life together. Ten months after our interview, I contacted her again. I was glad to learn that she was taking a diploma course. She was one of the few women who did take action after such a realization. Another young woman who had also dropped out of school expressed her desire to me that she wanted to be independent from the man she lived with. She actually had the abortion because she wanted to sort out her life and get a real job. However, a year after our interview, she was still talking the talk rather than walking the talk.

A 25-year-old graduate student, who had had two abortions, rationally summarized the lessons she has learned in three points:

1. Don't have pre-marital sex.
2. Don't regret it if one has.
3. It's important to protect oneself and not to have illusions about other people.

It took me a long while to respond to these three points. I was silent because I felt that the logic in her conclusion was questionable, but I had difficulty articulating it. I disagree with her while I don't have a better argument. What I felt is that she is hinting herself to be tough and to be independent both economically and emotionally. I had three in-depth interviews with her on the Internet, each time lasting over five hours, and these long talks eventually built up a bond of friendship between us in the virtual world. She is not a woman short of words. But when it comes to the question on what she has learned, she gives me three don'ts and one do, in highly concise

words. She does sound rational and tough in this short list, but lonely and unconvinced herself.

I have demonstrated women's views about fetus, their verbal strategies, and their reflections on the lessons they have learned. They are trying their best to get over the negative influence of an abortion experience and to move on in life. However, for many of them, some feelings are eventually undeniable and unresolved. According to this woman, for example:

I thought I could forget it. I thought I could pretend that nothing happened. But three months later, when I watched a movie about another woman, I eventually lost it. The woman in the movie had heart disease. When she was pregnant, her husband, her family, everyone was against her having the baby. But she insisted and she hid herself until the moment of her contraction... I couldn't finish watching the movie. My heart was aching: the heroine's physical condition didn't allow her to bear the baby but she risked her life to do so. She insisted to give birth at all costs. What about me? I'm perfectly fine but I didn't keep my baby. I terminated its life myself. What kind of person am I? I burst into tears and couldn't stop crying for days. I felt emptied from inside. It felt like I was a living dead.

This woman had suppressed her guilt feelings for months; however, a movie on TV unexpectedly pulled the trigger for her emotional breakdown. Many women reported such triggers of their emotional outburst. For example, seeing babies at her unborn baby's age, having nightmares, reading books of fiction, and so on. In the case of this woman, a movie on womanhood and motherhood made her recall her own experience and triggered her great depression.

4.4 Conclusion: Negotiation with the Meaning of Abortion

This chapter starts from women's perspectives towards fetus life, and ends in their seeking answers of women's independence, happiness, and unsolved complexes. In contrast to the vague meaning of bringing a new life to the world at a wrong time, the consequences are concrete and overwhelming. In the face of these powerful

consequences, my informants chose to have an abortion. I understand their loss from three perspectives.

First, women are lost regarding the meaning of fetus life. What does it mean to acknowledge a life? What expectations accompany a live being? My informants believe “every life deserves to live well” rather than “every life deserves to live.” Therefore, when they are convinced that they wouldn’t be able to provide their fetus an agreeable living condition, they voluntarily choose not to bring it into the world. Moreover, women take their right over the fetus for granted. “Here I am, a live woman standing in front of you. If I am not treated in a humane way, what humanity are we talking about for the fetus?” This is the logic of many women. It is hard for them to visualize the meaning of a fetus’ life when the meaning of their life is not answered.

Secondly, women are lost in the mainstream discourses on how to be a proper woman. The strong economy in today’s China means that many young women have more to lose by having a baby than during leaner economic times. In chapter 3 I’ve discussed the disjuncture between the dominant discourse of romantic love with its assumption that women have freedom to make decisions regarding sexual experience and the expectation that women bear responsibility for the results of sexual experience. Now that women are confronted with the result of their miscalculation in sexual experience, they can’t help thinking twice before they do any more stupid things, for they are taught that they should be independent, think of their future, and be responsible for themselves.

Finally, women are lost in their female body. My informants constantly feel that they are enslaved by their reproductive capacity. They find themselves in a disadvantaged situation in their relationship with men. They worry about getting pregnant when they engage in sex. When they give up their chance to be a mother with the abortion, they worry if the chance will ever visit them again. Being young unmarried women at this stage of their life, they think it’s wise to say no to a pregnancy. But they are unsure about the opportunity cost of the decision they make. In the future, when they are married and need to say yes, they worry if they will have another chance. My biggest reservation for feminist ideas is that we are not able to solve the issue of our female body. After years of fighting against the social norms that disadvantage women, and locating the inequality between the two sexes, we fail to offer a guideline for the next agenda. What will happen after we realize the

inequality between men and women? Should women try to live their lives as men? Should they try to achieve what men achieve? Should women take over a list of men's rights and obligations and fulfill them ourselves? But what if all of these don't suit our female body? Can we reconcile with our body? How?

And before the women could sort out these losses and confusions, they resort to having an abortion to avoid any more complications to their problem.

Chapter 5 Peasant Workers' Version of the Story

In 2004, New York Times published a series of articles to examine the tremendous gap between the rural and urban areas in China. New York Times used "The Great Divide" as the title of the series, addressing the issue that China has the world's fastest-growing economy but is one of its most unequal societies. As Kahn and Yardley points out in their New York Times article, "the problem for China is not just that the urban elite now drive BMW's, while many farmers are lucky to eat meat once a week. The problem is that the gap has widened partly because the government enforces a two-class system, denying peasants the medical, pension and welfare benefits that many urban residents have, while often even denying them the right to become urban residents. (2004)" I'd like to correct their statement by pointing out that the Chinese government's administrative power of denying peasants the right to become urban residents is the most important means of denying peasants the medical, pension and welfare benefits urban residents enjoy. Migration of peasants to work in urban areas does not change their rural identity and hardly improves their social status.

The rural-urban difference is greater than any class difference in Chinese society. In the methodology part of Chapter 1, I discussed about how the use of computer is an indicator of contrasting life realities of the rural and urban informants in this research. This finding gave me insights to understand the pattern of reproductive behavior among urban women. Therefore, instead of comparing urban women from different social classes, I look at how rural women living in an urban area react to premarital pregnancy.

Drawing mainly on face-to-face interviews with peasant workers in Dongguan, this chapter seeks to explore peasant workers' attitudes towards unintended pregnancy. I went to Houjie, a town in Dongguan, in search of young women with abortion experiences. To my surprise (and initial disappointment), it turned out that I met married women with children again and again. Peasant workers who find romantic love in Dongguan are active in experiencing sex with their partners (often without contraceptive knowledge or use). Therefore almost all of the women I interviewed had become pregnant before marriage.

In contrast to the urban women discussed in previous chapters, who tend to seek abortions if “the time is not right”, unmarried peasant workers in Dongguan are much less likely to terminate an unintended pregnancy. Instead, they marry the baby’s father and carry the pregnancy to term as long as the man agrees.⁴⁶ I therefore decided to devote a chapter discussing their experiences. The rural informants in this chapter are the same age of the urban informants in previous chapters; however, as women, they have already turned a new page in their life: they are married and have children. I intend to highlight the factors that prevent urban women from making the same choice. From the three stories in this chapter, we will see how peasant workers decide whether or not to have a baby.

5.1 Location: Houjie, Dongguan

Dongguan is an industrial city famous for its manufacturing industry in the Pearl River Delta. The city government administers 25 towns. These towns connect closely to each other geographically and economically. Houjie, the town where I conducted my research, is one of them. Peasant workers from all over the country have outnumbered local Dongguan residents since the delta area became “the factory of the world (世界工廠 *shijie gongchang*)” in the 1990s. Looking through the window of an inter-city bus, one can see bright and large factories as well as older and smaller ones lined up on both sides of the highway. As one gets off the bus and walks into the narrow streets and back alleys, one will find sweatshops as well as many other hastily and poorly built factories huddled together. This is indeed a world of factories. The sky over Dongguan is always gray if not brown. The disturbing chemical smell in the air haunts every newcomer’s nose. The city impressed me as rushed and abused. People come here to make money, not to make home.

Other than factories, another commonly seen architecture in town is rental houses (出租屋 “chuzu wu”) – ugly-looking three or four-story houses built for sheer utility and leaving almost no space between each other. They were built in recent years by local residents for rent. At a price of 300 to 400 yuan (water and electricity

⁴⁶ When the man disagrees, most women in Dongguan have abortions. I did spot women who were alone and in tears in the gynecology department of a local hospital. But I did not feel comfortable to approach them under such circumstances. Based on my observation, I believe that although peasant workers in Dongguan have abortions, they are still much more likely than urban women to get married and have a baby.

fee excluded), one can easily rent a small apartment for a month. Married couples, cohabitants, or whoever needs, find their home in these houses. Walking through a rental housing area on a weekday, one often encounters women chatting in twos and threes with their babies in their arms, and dogs wondering about. It almost resembles a scene of the rural life in its idle time, just that this is in a heavily industrialized town and people are from all over the country. According to the people I chatted with in the rental housing area, their “contracts” with their landlord are on a monthly basis. People move in and out, hardly any people stay in the same place longer than a year.

Like many other cities that popped up in China in the 1990s, Dongguan dreams of modernity and cosmopolitanism in every aspect of life. The most popular entertainment places in Dongguan are discos, bars, karaoke houses, and skating rinks⁴⁷. People in Dongguan eagerly mimic city dwellers’ lifestyle by observation and imagination. It’s reflected in the way people dress, the way they talk, and even the way they pull out a cell phone⁴⁸.

5.2 Informants⁴⁹

During my five visits to Houjie in August 2007, I conducted 11 in-depth interviews with peasant workers (3 males and 8 females), ranging in age from 20 to 27 years old. 10 of them were married⁵⁰. 7 of them had children. None of the 8 female informants had experiences of abortion before giving birth to their first child⁵¹. Some of my informants were randomly spotted at the waiting chairs at the gynecology department in a Houjie township hospital; the others were interviewed at the dormitory in a shoe factory⁵². Several informants later on introduced me to their friends and neighbors, which enabled me to interview more people and chat with

⁴⁷ I often joke with my classmates and friends in Hong Kong that the entertainment places in Dongguan are cheaper and lousier than those in Hong Kong in every way, but fundamentally they are the same thing.

⁴⁸ For example, the plastic sports sandals that enjoyed a weird popularity around the world from 2006 were also popular in Dongguan in 2007 when I was there (Of course! They manufactured them.). People wore those sandals because they thought it stylish.

⁴⁹ All names that appear in this chapter are pseudonyms.

⁵⁰ Among the 10 married informants, only 3 have marriage licenses. As long as a marital relationship is recognized by the couple, their families, and mutual friends, none of them think the paperwork is urgent and necessary. The women in the three cases I present in this chapter are all married without a marriage license.

⁵¹ 2 married women have had abortions to comply with the birth planning policy.

⁵² My friend introduced me to a factory her father owns. The factory has about three hundred workers, which is considered to be of medium size in Dongguan.

even more. Generalizations are based on these interviews and chats. The representativeness of these generalizations is not statistically tested. Besides the 11 peasant workers, I also interviewed 3 medical staff in hospitals in Dongguan, who are all local residents.

The three stories I tell in this chapter are no longer about unmarried women with abortion experiences. They are about rural women who encountered the same unexpected and problematic situation of premarital pregnancy. However, they did not choose to have abortions as the urban women in this study did. Do their experiences tell a different story than that of the urban women?

I decide to write this chapter with thick description, because the interviews I conducted in Dongguan were not through the Internet but in person. I used all my senses to understand life in Dongguan. I think my observations would be helpful for the readers to know more about my informants.

5.3.1 Peasant Workers and Love Adventure

Romantic relationship is an important part of life for the young peasant workers in Dongguan. The factory work is demanding, but young people find time to have a taste of love. The young couple in this section represents the most common dating pattern among peasant workers. I consider this pattern to be particularly adventurous for women.

A Young Couple in the Hospital

I struck up a conversation with a young couple at the waiting chairs in the town hospital in Houjie. We talked about how they met, fell in love, and got married in Dongguan. The girl was outgoing and did most of the talking. The man was comparatively quiet and shy. It was a light-hearted time for the three of us.

When the girl left for an ultra-sound examination, her husband and I continued to talk as we waited outside. The young man looked at my Nike sneakers, and pointed out the shoes' several different materials professionally. Sneakers became our topic. He talked about the recent ups and downs of the prices of these materials on the international market, how it influenced the profit margins of making sneakers, and further influenced his salary and job opportunity. He had worked on shoe production lines for four years. Being a peasant worker originally from Sichuan

province, he has no career future in his job⁵³ – the most he can achieve is to be a skilled worker, which he has already achieved. What impressed me was: as a worker on a production line, he cares about the materials' prices on the international market! But what use of it for him to have such a vision?

He was not as confident when we talked about his wife's pregnancy. Shortly after the spring festival, the girl found herself pregnant. As a typical solution, they got married. The wedding was simply a dinner party with several friends and the girl's parents⁵⁴. Thus they were recognized as a married couple. Unfortunately, the girl had a miscarriage after three months. Now she was pregnant again, but there was no light of happiness on the man's face.

She is too childish. She never listens to me. She only cares about having fun and doing things her way. That's how she miscarried last time. Because of the pregnancy and miscarriage, she hasn't worked a day this year. Every hospital visit costs at least two hundreds yuan, and there are other expenses... (Sigh). (Is your salary enough to support both of you?) It's tough. I can barely make ends meet. I work in a shoe factory and make 1,200 yuan a month. On Sundays I work part-time as a laborer. But life is still tight. We cannot save any money at all. (What is it like to be married?) You would know when you get married. (He answered with another sigh, averting his eyes.) No choice. Life is tough. And she doesn't understand. She is too childish.... You will learn when you get married.

When the girl came out, she looked upset. Without a word she went to the gynecologist for diagnosis and advice. Both her husband and I were confused. The previous light-heartedness in her was gone. When she came out from the doctor's office, she dragged the man to leave. He asked, "What's wrong?" She replied in irritation, "Read it yourself!" I sneaked a peek at the report, "The fetus is dead." in black and white, sharp and cold.

⁵³ Factory owners tend to trust their family members, local people, or at least Cantonese speakers to promote them to managerial positions. Ching Kwan Lee (1998) also observed and mentioned this phenomenon in her research in south China factories.

⁵⁴ The Pearl River Delta started its industrialization process in the 1980s and has at least two generations of peasant workers now. The girls' parents are in their late thirties and early forties, working in factories in Dongguan. The man's parents are peasants in Sichuan and have never been out to work in factories.

The couple left hastily. I watched the man get on his bike, carrying his woman on the backseat, and ride into a street. They made a turn at the end of the street and disappeared. It was hard to judge them. The man made his wife pregnant twice within six months; however, despite the fact that their marital relationship was not legally protected, he was faithful to his wife and never tried to run away. He supported the family with an income of a little more than 1200 yuan per month. And the job was insecure because the factory owner was likely to cut the number of workers at any time due to all kinds of reasons. If he got fired, he had to find another job and it would start from 700 yuan per month again⁵⁵. His wife was not sharing his economical burden, nor did she appear to be understanding and emotionally supportive to him. He was 24 years old. His wife had two miscarriages within six months. He worked 7 days a week struggling to make ends meet. He found himself trapped in the hardship of life.

How about the girl? With an incomplete elementary school education, she first came to Dongguan at the age of 16. It had been almost two decades that young people about her age in her village came to the Pearl River Delta to work in factories. Therefore she was not afraid when she came out to see the world. The longest job she has worked was 10 months. It's easy to quit one job and find another one just a few blocks away. After a year, she went back home because she was tired of working. But then she thought it was more fun to be in a city than to be in her village. So she came out to work again. She met her boyfriend at a skating rink. They heated up quickly and moved together after a couple of months. She was 20. She just learned that the fetus in her womb was dead, again! She didn't work a day this year but it was because she never felt well enough to go to work. Her husband didn't give her a decent wedding or dowry. Her parents were not happy because he was from Sichuan while they were from Jiangxi (the two provinces have different dialects, different customs, and geographically distant). He claimed to have a high school education, but in her eyes he didn't "seem to be as confident as the other high-school graduates" she knew. He didn't make enough money. He worked 7 days a week and often worked overtime (yet if he didn't need to work overtime, it couldn't be a good sign either for the factory or for their income). She was unhappy and unsatisfied. But the

⁵⁵ Many factories in Dongguan pay an entry-level salary to new employees in the first month and increase the salary from there, regardless of the workers' qualifications. Technicians are treated differently. Overall the trust between employer and employee in these factories is very low.

most urgent thing at the moment was to get rid of the dead fetus in her womb. But what then?

After they left, I asked Dr. Lai⁵⁶ about the girl's condition. She told me that the girl needed a vacuum suction operation and she let them go back to decide when to have the operation. "Is it okay to leave it untended for days?" I asked nervously. "Of course she needs to have the operation as soon as possible. But you can't press these people, you know. Some people prefer to go to a cheaper place to do it. It's their choice." Dr. Lai continued unsympathetically, "You see these girls, they dare adventure across the country, but they dare not enter a hospital alone, because they are barely literate. Many of them have difficulty filling the information form at registration."

Analysis

It's not true that all girls lack of courage to consult a doctor alone, for I did see women waiting in the hospital themselves, sometimes in tears. I quote Dr. Lai's words because she mentioned an interesting phenomenon: the peasant workers dare to geographically adventure across the country but fear to walk into a hospital alone. How do we view an under-educated peasant's migration to work in a factory in Dongguan?

In her study of fertility and the village culture in China, Li Yinhe points out that the village culture puts every person in supervision and competition with the others. A peasant is often driven by an invisible force to follow what his fellow villagers do (Li, 1993: 76). Although Li was referring this characteristic to the case of fertility competition among rural people, I think it can be also applied to the case of a peasant worker's migrating to a city for a factory job – "just because the others are doing so, I should do the same."

What is adventurous, in my opinion, is the dating pattern of this young couple. It is common among the young peasant workers in Dongguan: meet someone through a friend at an entertainment place, become boyfriend and girlfriend, and move in together after a couple of months. They hardly have any knowledge about sex or contraceptive methods when they start to cohabit. So it's only a matter of time

⁵⁶ I was introduced to this gynecological doctor by the same friend that introduced me to the shoe factory. Houjie is a small town although it has a big number of migrant workers. Dr. Dai is a relative of this friend's.

for the woman to get pregnant and that's when they move onto the next stage of their relationship. A woman's judgment is critical in such a love adventure. Because when an unintended pregnancy happens, the man's sense of responsibility determines her and her baby's fate.

If the man refuses to marry the woman, the only thing she could do is to have an abortion. The moral and economical prices to raise a child alone for an unmarried woman are so high that they render the option invalid. I hadn't met or heard about any cases that women raised illegitimate children on their own. Although villagers nowadays accept big-belly brides with tolerance⁵⁷, it is still a taboo for a woman to be a single mother. Considering the tremendous pressure for an unmarried girl and her family to face criticism and contempt from other villagers, one always chooses to have an abortion under such circumstance.

Before peasants migrated into cities to work in factories, they found a spouse through match-making. Matches are made within nearby towns and villages. The "supervision and competition (Li, 1993)" of village culture provide moral and economic security to such a marriage relationship for women. Everyone is watching and measuring the dowry and wedding, "the bargaining power" of a woman reaches the climax of her life at such a moment.

However, if a female peasant worker meets her spouse through a love relationship by free choice, her bargaining power drops to the lowest point when she gets pregnant before marriage. Even if the man is an honest and reliable person and marries her, the dowry and wedding he offers will suffer a discount either decided by him or by his family⁵⁸. "The rice is cooked. (生米煮成熟飯)" The woman cannot complain much but must be grateful to the man for saving her from an abortion and an ill name.

The female young peasant workers I talked to didn't seem to care much about dowry nowadays. They scorned the "old-fashioned" idea of asking for a dowry to get married. They are eager to experience romance in the city with a man they met by fate (緣分 yuan fen). They are not afraid to cohabit with the man if they love him.

⁵⁷ My university classmates who are from villages in the southern and middle part of China told me that their villagers may harmlessly gossip and laugh behind the couple's back, but nobody thinks it is a big deal any more. It's not big news that the bride is pregnant. They are used to such things nowadays. Some of my informants in Dongguan reported that they got married at home when the brides were pregnant, and they were not embarrassed about it at all.

⁵⁸ When talking about dowry, the men I interviewed said it was not necessary nowadays. This is particularly common when husband and wife are from different provinces.

They think it's modern and cosmopolitan. But does the "modern" way mean more equality for the women in their relationship with men? I don't think so. I think it makes romantic relationships of higher risk for the women without structural protection. I find that when a breakup happens, the women in Dongguan blame themselves.

5.3.2 Peasant Workers and Birth Planning Policy

For married peasant workers in Dongguan, an unexpected pregnancy implies different challenges and considerations. Xiao Feng is in the middle of this situation. I witnessed the process of her decision making. The solution Xiao Feng and her friend came up with was based on their economic calculation and other people's experiences. It suggests an adaptive pattern of reproductive behavior among peasant workers.

Xiao Feng's Story

At a fresh market in a rental housing area, a long slogan is hanging at an eye-catching height. It shouts, "The lawful right of practicing birth planning is protected by the law. Not practicing birth planning is violation of the law! (實行計劃生育的合法權益受法律保護, 不實行計劃生育是違法行爲!)" Readers may find the slogan awkward. The original Chinese has grammar mistakes as well as logical flaws. I had to stop in a busy fresh market and repeat it three times silently to myself to get the meaning. No wonder nobody pays attention to it. The slogan has become part of the everyday life scene, and a meaningless decoration to the fresh market.

The national birth planning policy is as empty as the slogan for the peasant workers in Dongguan. As the policy was designed to operate at a local level, it means that each level of birth planning officials are responsible to its registered local residents, and the peasant workers' birth planning work is left to their hometowns. Therefore, it is possible for peasant workers to violate the birth planning regulations without being punished as long as they don't return home. However, at the same time they have no access to the free contraceptive service provided by the birth planning office of Dongguan, for the reason that they are not registered citizens. Thus the Dongguan officials have no obligation or responsibility for them on the birth planning matter.

I met Xiao Qin and her friend Xiao Feng outside of Dr. Dai's office. I didn't intend to approach them at first, because they didn't seem to be the kind of informants I needed (I assumed that my informant shouldn't have a baby in her arms). However, as I watched the baby girl trying to climb on the floor with her bare feet and hands, I couldn't help walking up to stop her. "The floor is very dirty!" I talked to the baby but intended to catch her mother's attention. Xiao Qin picked up her daughter from the floor and smiled to me. There was no obvious dirt or stain on the floor. She padded the baby symbolically, as though to soothe me. And we started a conversation.

Xiao Qin became close friends with Xiao Feng because her husband comes from the same village as Xiao Feng and her husband. They were also neighbors in the rental housing. Last year, Xiao Feng returned home to give birth. She took care of the baby with the help of her husband's family until the baby reached one year old. She then came back to Dongguan to rejoin her husband. It had just been two months since their reunion and she had just found a job. Unfortunately the IUD inserted in her failed and Xiao Feng was pregnant again. She couldn't carry this pregnancy to term because it would violate the birth planning regulation of four-year spacing between two childbirths.⁵⁹ The doctor prescribed abortion pills for her as she required.

On the way we walked to their apartments, Xiao Feng complained, "It cost me nearly 100 yuan just for these pills. If I were home, they would cost nothing. I have an IUD inserted so it's not my fault for getting pregnant. And they (the birth planning officials) will take care of everything." Xiao Qin suggested that she go home for a free abortion, "It's free at home and you can also be better taken care of by the family. At least your in-laws will cook for you and wash the clothes."⁶⁰ Xiao Feng seemed to be persuaded.

The next morning when I visited Xiao Qin at her home, she was watching *The Monkey King* on CCTV-1. There were only two channels to watch, for they could not afford cable TV. Her ten-month-old baby girl was playing on the floor. Xiao Qin quit her job when she was pregnant and hadn't worked for over a year. During that time she had been cared for by her husband's family for several months.

⁵⁹ The national birth planning policy varies across the country. In Xiao Feng's village, the regulations allow up to two children per couple spaced no less than four years apart.

⁶⁰ It's widely believed by the Chinese that it is important in post-natal (and post-abortion) care that the woman not touch cold water.

She told me that she would send the baby back to them and start to work again in about two months.

Xiao Feng came downstairs to join us. She told us that she didn't take the abortion pills the doctor prescribed. "My daughter is approaching two years old now. If I keep this baby, by the time my labor comes, it would violate the four-year-spacing regulation by only a few months. Maybe they will let me have the baby." She said in an optimistic tone. She looked more cheerful than the previous day. Perhaps it was because she had found herself an excuse not to have the abortion immediately.

The three of us had lunch together. Xiao Qin cooked two dishes that tasted sour and spicy. They roused Xiao Feng's appetite effectively. She ate three bowls of rice, explaining that she was too worried and sick to eat anything last night. We encouraged her to cheer up and eat for her baby from now on. She was so fascinated by the idea of carrying her pregnancy to term that she started to plan it in detail.

It turned out that the plan was not much different than her previous one when she was thinking of having an abortion. Now that she was going to have a baby, she was not planning to work within these two years. Without any prospective income, it would still be the best option for her to go home to save on expenses. If she goes home, however, she would be very likely to be pressured by the local family-planning workers to have an abortion. "I'll try my best to bargain with them. If that doesn't work, I'll have the abortion." I bit my tongue on my great doubt about her luck. When she did not want to have an IUD inserted before, the local birth planning workers visited her everyday to press on it. It is highly doubtful whether they would let her have the baby.

Xiao Feng left Dongguan after two weeks. Her husband moved back to the factory dormitory on the same day she left. It only cost 80 yuan a month to dine in the factory (accommodation for free), there was no point for him to rent an apartment when his wife was not with him. Xiao Feng and her husband had only lived together in their rented apartment for two months this time. She was not happy that an unintended pregnancy sent her home again.

Analysis

For Xiao Feng, whether or not to carry her second unintended pregnancy to term is fundamentally an economical question. The absolute cost to raise a child in

rural areas is very low. Peasants describe it as “to add a set of bowl and chopsticks to the table.” In the past, the birth planning policy was the sole force that limited their family size. However, participating in industrial work makes peasant workers calculate the comparative cost of raising a child. In other words, they consider not only the absolute cost of having a baby, but also the loss of family income during the time when the woman cannot work.

It is expensive to live in Dongguan. Thus peasant workers have developed an economical way of family life when they are having babies. The plan is when a woman is about six months pregnant, she will quit working and go to her husband’s home to wait for the labor. Because she cannot work during late pregnancy,⁶¹ it is an economically rational choice for her to go home and for her husband to continue to work. Moreover, it is cheaper to deliver babies at home, because with family members’ help, she does not need to pay for staying in the hospital for post-natal care. When the baby is about one year old, the woman will leave the baby with her husband’s family and rejoin her husband in Dongguan. Then they could resume the double income life.

Although Xiao Feng is reluctant to give up her baby, it is not because of a belief that the baby is a sacred life thus should not be killed. Xiao Feng feels reluctant to give it up mostly because she is afraid of having an abortion. She feels it “against nature” to terminate a pregnancy. She has given birth once, but has never had an abortion. Therefore, compared to the unfamiliar and immediate suffering, she prefers to have the familiar and delayed one. If she really wants to have the baby, she could have chosen to have it in Dongguan. But she did not. She and her husband have weighed the pros and cons of violating the birth planning policy. Their economic calculation goes so far as to compare where to have the abortion according to cost.

Xiao Feng’s case also shows that although peasant workers are far away from home, they are not completely beyond the control of their home villages. They retain a strong tie to their villages emotionally and economically. Most peasant workers don’t plan to stay in Dongguan for long. They want to save some money over a few years and return home to start small businesses or simply to have a better life. If they

⁶¹ Factory work is intensive and physically demanding. It usually requires over 10 hours standing by the production line. When workers have to work overtime, 18 hours a day is not uncommon. Factory owners “persuade” pregnant women to quit, if they don’t fire the woman directly.

violate the birth planning policy, either they will have to suffer a heavy fine at home, or they will have to give birth in Dongguan, which is also a heavy economical burden. Therefore, the majority of peasant workers who cannot make a fortune out of their salaries think twice when they have to decide on giving birth.

I notice that for many peasant workers, although they have a plan to save money, they actually can't save any, nor are they too motivated about it. Xiao Qin and Xiao Feng, for example, quit working soon after they were pregnant, and they didn't work at all before their babies reached one year old. I heard women who managed to work until their sixth or seventh month of pregnancy criticize women like Xiao Qin and Xiao Feng as spoiled (嬌氣 "jiao qi"), implying they are lazy and irresponsible. However, this kind of laziness can also be viewed as a woman's negotiation of power with her husband's family, since it is a custom that the pregnant wife live and be taken care of by the husband's family. In some places, it is even a taboo for the woman to be taken care of by her natal family. Compared to the boring and tiring work in a factory, it is understandable for a woman to choose to take a rest by having a baby.

5.3.3 Peasant Workers and Arranged Marriage

The two women in the previous two sections followed a pattern of falling in love, becoming pregnant, getting married, and having babies, which is commonplace in Dongguan. As I have discussed, such a pattern is not to women's advantage and can be risky. What if a woman doesn't want to follow this pattern? Ar Hua tried to avoid the risks by cutting out the romance in her life.

The Flawless Life of Ar Hua

Among all the female peasant workers I interviewed, Ar Hua was the only one who had worked in Dongguan for ten years but remained childless. At the age of 25, Ar Hua considered herself to be old. The girls who came to work in Dongguan at the same time as she did were now mothers of at least one child, and most of them had returned home. Her friends had "changed generations" as she put it and she found herself the oldest childless woman everywhere she went.

Ar Hua had a very strong sense of right and wrong. She never made her family worry. When her elder sister brought her to Dongguan ten years ago, she was

told that the world outside home was sophisticated and dangerous, particularly for girls. She remembered it by heart. She worked hard and lived in the dormitory. On off days she didn't go out unless to buy groceries. She wasn't interested in the entertainment places that were popular among young people. For years she submitted all her salary to her elder sister, and the sister sent their money to home by post every month. She had only changed factories twice, and she worked for eight years in the second one. As a peasant worker who started from 15 years old, Ar Hua's achievement was marvelous: from an unskilled worker with an entry-level salary, she grew to be a line leader, a group leader, and finally, an assistant of the department manager – an office job. She could work at any position on a shoe production line on any floor (different stages of processing are usually located on different floors of a factory). She learned to use a computer within the first month of her new job in the office. However, despite all her qualifications, her salary had only doubled from the entry-level salary⁶². And her job was without contract, insurance, or any extra benefits. But she was happy with it.

What made Ar Hua's life flawless in the eyes of her village people was something else: she quit work and had an arranged marriage at home in the spring of this year.⁶³ She reserved the right for her parents to choose who she was to marry. "Men in the outside world are sophisticated and dangerous. It's better to marry someone back at home," she said. Her husband is from a neighborhood village. She traveled thousands of miles from home to work in Dongguan, but married a man who lived only twenty minutes' walk distance away. And that was perfect according to her and her people.

Ar Hua didn't feel much for her husband yet. After being married for eight months, she came out to work again. "But he is an honest and reliable man. I was just bored at home. I've asked him to join me here. He will come soon." She emphasized. I asked if she felt sorry about not taking a shot to have a love relationship by free choice. She shook her head firmly with an I-know-better smile:

The men here are dishonest and unreliable. When they want you to be their girlfriend, they treat you well and talk sweet, but that doesn't mean anything. They are playful. When they are tired they get rid of you like taking off a

⁶² She makes 1400 yuan a month. The entry-level salary of the factory she works for is 700.

⁶³ It was in 2007 when I conducted the interview.

piece of clothes. I have several friends who got dumped by their boyfriends and were heartbroken. They were so sad that they couldn't even go to work for days at the time. Sometimes they couldn't let it go (“想不開 xiang bu kai”) and lost their senses (“走極端 zou jiduan”). A former workmate of mine was dumped by the man when she got pregnant. She had no choice but to have an abortion. After that she disappeared. Later I heard from her close friend that she had become a prostitute in Shenzhen. That's a rare case, but it's alarming. So you tell me what's the point of taking a shot to have a free love? (Without waiting for my answer, she answered it herself.) Love is only a few months of passion. If the man is a reliable person, he will marry you eventually. Married life is pretty much the same (no matter how you met each other). But it's very likely that if he comes from a different province your parents will worry about you if you marry that far. And what will happen if the man is not a reliable person? You break up. That's a very sad thing.

I couldn't say anything but nod like a pupil. The assuredness in her speech was not to be challenged. Ar Hua was very pleased to find a university student agree with her. She definitely felt a sense of superiority in front of the young girls who were fooling around in romantic relationships.

Analysis

Ar Hua feels most comfortable and accepted by fulfilling the conventional role of being an obedient and familial daughter. Her friends' miserable experiences with men made her believe that romantic love is only an illusion. She is aware that women pay a heavier price than men for adventure in love and sexuality. She views such an experience not only an illusion of love but also too expensive for a girl to risk. So she chose to avoid the risk and cast romantic love out of her life. Scholars would argue that such love, after all, is a middle-class invention and discourse.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Illouz suggests that in the dating stage working-class people show the same romantic competence as their upper-middle-class counterparts in a way that they enact the “correct” script of romance. However, after marriage, living up to the standards of romance becomes more difficult due to working-class men and women's different expectations of marriage. The middle-class model of communication and intimacy that has been disseminated through popular culture is consistent with women's socialization at large. Working-class women expect romance, passion, and communication to continue while working-class men only expect wife and home to provide him with comfort and

Ar Hua appears to be more rational than her peers. She has been careful not to fall into the romantic traps that seem to disadvantage girls. She refuses to be a victim of the love adventure. But she is not able to come up with a new and better solution than resigning herself to an arranged marriage. She hasn't been exposed to alternative designs for life. So she believes that the conventional way is the safest and the most righteous life design for a girl.

From her performance and achievement at work, we can see that Ar Hua has a stronger motivation for fulfillment than her peers. Although her work doesn't promise her a career or job security, it has given her self-confidence and mobility. Her husband's family is not happy with her coming out to work in Dongguan since she married into their family. However, Ar Hua has a good reputation in the village and she has even convinced her husband to work in Dongguan with her. So the man's family has to trust her and respect her opinion. This incidence shows that Ar Hua has a strong bargaining power with her husband and his family.

Ar Hua did not take any contraceptive method after she got married. She does not try to control her fertility. Rural people think it unnatural to take contraceptives before their first childbirth. (Actually, they think it unnatural to take contraceptives at all but the birth planning policy requires them to do so after first childbirth.) This is consistent with Ar Hua's value of being a conventional good woman. Her sense of independence and assertiveness is within the framework of this value. When the baby comes, she will return home like the other women do.

5.4 Conclusion: Not A Different Story

In conclusion, although unmarried female peasant workers are more likely to avoid abortion when they are pregnant before marriage, it does not translate into their having more power to decide fertility. From the stories of three women I presented in this chapter, we can see that the three main factors for a peasant worker to decide on whether or not to terminate an unintended pregnancy are: administrative constraints, expectations, and gender relations.

The administrative constraints to peasant workers' life are minimal in Dongguan. With an identification card (which is possible to borrow from others), one

emotional security. (1997: 279) In the previous section Ar Hua's observation that "married life is pretty much the same" supports Illouz's theory.

can easily apply for a job in a factory. For the other aspects of their life in Dongguan, the government is almost unseen. As I mentioned earlier, peasant workers retain strong ties with their hometowns where administrative forces take an effect. However, in a village where everyone knows everyone else, a marriage license is not really necessary. Most of the married couples I met in Dongguan do not have marriage licenses even after being married for over five years and having had two or three children. Unlike a registered city resident who needs a birth permit to give birth, a peasant worker only needs her partner's consent. For peasant workers, the concept of "illegitimate child" is defined by whether the child has a father present.

Low expectations make a woman move into motherhood without hesitation. A familiar warning regarding adolescent pregnancy is that she is risking her future if she chooses to enter motherhood too early. The fact for a young woman peasant worker in Dongguan is that she doesn't really have much to risk about her future by bearing babies. She hasn't received much education, nor does her factory work promise a future. The only difference between having babies at 20 and 27 years old for her is, by 27 years old she might have more than a child already. She will still be a factory worker working on a production line, living in a rental apartment, and their family economic condition will still seem tight. She has never been promised more than that in life. She doesn't have a vision. What could she lose by having a baby? It may even help her boring life become a little more eventful.

A big part of the fun and excitement lies in her life is her romantic relationship with men. However, there is a risk in consuming this fun and excitement. It is a high price for her to pay if she has bad judgment and has committed to an irresponsible man in her adventure in love and sexuality. That will doom her whole market value as a woman. As it is common to openly cohabit with a partner, when she has made that step, people know. Therefore, people also know when a relationship fails. The only secret she can keep for herself is whether she has had an abortion. But that secret is still hard to keep if she lives in the factory dormitory after the breakup. And if she stays with the man although he refuses to be her child's father, her bargaining power will be hopeless after the abortion. Either way, the woman so often finds herself trapped.

The reason why the woman is trapped is because her future is her marriage, nothing else. And she is not equipped with contraceptives for her adventure. That's why gender relations decide a woman's fate when she gets pregnant, which is only a

matter of time. By gender relations I mean it at the micro level, the relationship between a woman and her partner. The social norms advantage the man in many ways. The open attitude on dating and sex, the simplified wedding ceremony and the minimal administrative constraints on marriage make gender relations even more critical. Because for a couple working as migrant workers in a strange city, both passionate when they start a sexually-involved romantic relationship, and both ignorant about contraceptive use, it's always easier for the man to get out than for the woman.

Working a few years in a strange city as a migrant worker doesn't change the fact that her root and home is back in her village. And for a married woman from a rural background, her negotiation of power usually starts when she is pregnant. That's when the social norms turn to her favor. She is supposed to be well taken care of, to be loved by all the family members, and to be respected as a future mother. Therefore, the mark of a reliable man, although this was not articulated by my informants in this way, is if he will bring the woman to this page of her life.

I argue that although in this study the women in Guangzhou chose to have an abortion while the women in Dongguan chose to get married and have the baby, such a difference doesn't tell a different story on reproductive politics, which in Solinger's term is a question about "*Who has power over matters of pregnancy and its consequences*" (2005: 250)? In the social context of China, it is obvious that the state is not the only one with the right to decide which women are legitimate mothers. For unmarried women, social norms of proper marriage are very powerful over matters of her pregnancy and its consequences.

Men are central in both rural and urban women's reproductive decisions. This is because a marriage can resolve the stigmatized nature of premarital pregnancy. However, in this chapter we can see that it is eventually the expectation for life and the opportunities life offers that drive women to different paths. The reason I choose to include a small study on the peasant workers' experiences is because the difference between rural and urban in China is greater than the difference between working class and middle class. My finding on women's different patterns of reproductive behavior in this study is similar to the findings regarding women of different classes in other societies.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

I entered the field almost like a blank sheet of paper – having only read a little literature about abortion but knowing nothing about it in reality. The flow of the chapters reflects the flow of my field experience as well as thinking process. Before I reach the conclusion, let me briefly go over the previous four chapters.

In chapter 2 we looked at the varied experiences of abortion and how women are greatly influenced by the discourse of romantic love. The first thing that surprised me in the field was that my informants would spend hours talking about their romantic relationships in reflection on their abortion experiences. I found that for these women, men are central to the abortion experience. Their cooperation and expressions of love determine a woman's abortion experience as smooth, disruptive, or ambiguous.

From people's comments we can see that women are expected to bear responsibility for the results of sexual experiences. This contradicts the assumption that women should "give everything" for romantic love and are free to make this decision. Therefore, when a woman is caught by an unexpected result of her romantic love experience, i.e. an unwanted pregnancy, the first thing that occurs to her is to share as much as the responsibility of this consequence with the man that impregnated her. As we see, if everything works out fine, a happy ending can result, which is a satisfactory marriage that lives up to everyone's expectation. The stupid/smart scale people apply when they comment on women with abortion experiences caught my attention. How is it different from the moral/immoral scale people applied in societies where abortion is also in the sphere of taboo?

In chapter 3, we paid close attention to the stigmatizing nature of premarital pregnancy and abortion in China. In today's China, where premarital sex and even cohabitation are commonplace among young people, and advertisements on abortion services are everywhere, it seems to me at first glance that women are more ready to "pass" than the society are to stigmatize abortion experience. However, the apparent openness at the social level doesn't mean acceptance and tolerance at the individual level. Parents are not ready to learn that their own children are having sex and men are not ready to marry a woman who has been impregnated by another man.

The fast-growing business of hymen repair surgeries in China may not immediately seem relevant to this thesis. Hymen repair uses modern technology to echo an ancient theme: men's requirement of a virgin wife. "Preference" is a better word than "requirement" given the social reality that fewer and fewer women are virgins on their wedding nights. It is because of the "preference" of men that some women choose to have hymen repair surgeries. Since hymen repair is not applied by many people, I didn't discuss the pros and cons in details. My concern is the fact that all women lied about their past experiences of abortion. The fact that they are lying and the feeling that they need to lie convinced me that sexual experiences discriminate against women.

In chapter 4, we explored the inner world of women. From the discursive richness in their construction of the meaning of the fetus, we understand that they have put a lot of effort in making sense of their abortion experiences and in perceiving the influence it brings to their identity. From the lessons they have learned through the experiences, we can see that they are seeking self-fulfillment from the mainstream constructed ideas but they so often feel lost in those discourses.

First, they are lost regarding the meaning of fetus life. They tend to agree with the social expectation accompanying a live being, that a baby should be born to a family with both parents and comfortable environment. If they are not able to give this to the baby at its birth, it's better not to bring it into the world. At the same time women are somewhat irritated by this rigid social assumption. They apologize to the fetus and express their anguish in anonymous posts on the Internet.

Secondly, women are lost regarding the idea of "proper woman" in mainstream discourses. Education, career, marriage, and children are all important goals for a woman to achieve in her youth. However, there is a strict order for her to follow. She is not allowed to get married before she completes her education or to have children before getting married. If she falls off the track of a proper life, she suffers tremendous loss on the opportunities life offers. A single event of premarital pregnancy, if not well dealt with, can ruin her whole life as a woman.

Therefore, women finally find themselves lost in their female body. They feel enslaved by their reproductive capacity that constrains them from enjoying equal freedom with men. They find their female body entitles them a women-only mistake that may prevent them from achieving what men achieve. There is a long way for women to go to reach reconciliation with their female body.

In chapter 5, we averted our attention from urban women to look at peasant workers' experiences regarding premarital pregnancy. During the last month of my field work, I went to Dongguan out of curiosity on how women from different social backgrounds deal with a similar problematic situation. Measured by people's educational level, economic status, life opportunity and many other factors, the rural-urban difference is greater than any other class difference in China. My explanation to why peasant workers are more likely to marry the child's father and have child at an early age is that they have little to lose by doing so. On the contrary, living in a more economically advanced area means that urban women lose more in having a baby at an early age. Therefore, although men are central to the abortion experience for urban women, they do not influence the decision of women to have an abortion because having the child is not seen as an option. However, for rural women, men are central to the women's reproductive decision.

In conclusion, when young women are trapped by the stigma of premarital pregnancy, having or not having an abortion are both ways for them to negotiate with the structural and ideological oppression on their sexuality. Both rural and urban women in China avoid the oppression not by resisting the discrimination of a sexual stigma but by graduating from it through the lessons they learn. They choose to endure, conceal, and transform the abortion experience in the aim of achieving a gendered version of personal success, among which a happy marriage is a key element, and eventually, of maintaining their sense of human dignity.

The Ideal Life for Women

The social norm of the ideal life for women is not always set against her personal fulfillment in a Chinese woman's mind; it is indeed considered a mandatory condition for a person to attain full human rights and to enjoy life properly. Thus a woman would find herself under the internal urge as well as external coercion to meet certain requirements at certain points of her life. When she fails to fulfill these tasks, not only people will ask "what's her problem" but also she is likely to view herself as a social deviant.

What I discovered in my study of young women's experiences of abortion in China is that the ideal that women should be successful in their education, career, and marriage has become the dominant discourse that regulates women's behaviors

and their perceptions of themselves. Abortion is one of the self-correcting actions women take to live up to this norm. The stigmatizing nature of premarital pregnancy is not mainly about a sexual stigma, but about the stigma that one doesn't care about her future, in other words, lacks commitment to the ideal life for women. The other discourses, such as filial piety and responsibility are all closely related to the ideal life discourse. In light of this statement, if a woman is committed to achieving the ideal life, she is a filial daughter and a responsible person. Here is an anecdote that demonstrates how powerful this discourse is to some women.

Once an informant asked me how old I was during an interview. When I told her I was 23, she blurted, "How I wish I were 23!" This informant was a college student at the age of 21, and was planning to have an abortion in the week when I interviewed her. She wished she were as old as I was, because if she were 23 she would have graduated from school and would have the baby instead of an abortion. How could two years make such a difference?

According to this informant, it makes a huge difference. In two years she would have completed her university education, have a job (or have qualifications for a decent job), and would be ready to fulfill the next task of getting married. Therefore, in two years most of the social pressures and barriers that prevent her from getting married would disappear. Her statement sounds rather dramatic. However, it is a fact that many universities in China have regulations forbidding undergraduate students to have children. This informant will drop out of school if she chooses to give birth, which means her life will undergo some major changes for the decision she makes. Fearing the consequence of a bad decision, this student chose not to be side-tracked by an ill-timed pregnancy and had an abortion.

Defiant Love, Obedient Abortion

Many feminist scholars have become aware of the difficulties with employing the notion of resistance as an analytic tool. They find that people "simultaneously resist and reproduce, challenge and reappropriating meanings as they also undermine those challenges. (Kondo 1990:221)" Moreover, a sad irony lies in that "power can sometimes be more effectively resisted when it is accepted than when it is opposed. (Ogasawara 1998: 138)" As Kondo says,

That people inevitably participate in their own oppressions, buying into hegemonic ideologies even as they struggle against those oppressions and those ideologies – a familiar face of life to women, people of color, colonized and formerly colonized people – is a poignant and paradoxical facet of human life... (T)he nature of those oppressions, the arenas in which resistance can be expressed, indeed the very definitions of resistance are *culturally* mediated. (1990: 221)

Abortion is viewed as a defiant behavior in many societies; however, in the context of Chinese society, its defiant nature is ambivalent. This is particularly the case when it comes to young single women in urban China. Young women today bear an unprecedented expectation on their educational and career achievement than any generation of women in the Chinese history. Premarital (or teenage) pregnancy is a taboo, not because it's defiant to engage in premarital sex, but because it violates the newly-constructed norm of proper womanhood. Women feel they need to finish education, become economically independent from their maternal family, and marry properly before they have babies. Therefore, their choice to have an abortion is a form of accommodation rather than of resistance to the oppression on female sexuality. They may have tasted a bit of sexual autonomy through engaging in a romantic love relationship. However, when they get pregnant, they correct themselves by obediently resorting to an abortion.

As Giddens points out, "sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms. (1992: 15)" Young women's experience of abortion is one of the most important aspects to look at young women's sexuality in today's China. As I have mentioned in the first chapter, this is a generation of women encouraged from childhood to value the educational and career success that the modern economy and the fertility transition enable them to pursue. They were brought up in absence of brothers, so they start to bear responsibilities that used to be assigned to sons. They enjoy a greater degree of sexual freedom in a society that's rapidly changing and abandoning traditional values. They are excited to adventure in love and sexuality. An unexpected pregnancy is a cruel reminder of their female body.

During my fieldwork, I was bombarded by women's accusations of women's fate. "How bitter it is to be a woman! (女人的命真苦!)" "How pathetic women's fate is! (做女人太惨了!)" I heard this kind of complaints from almost every informant of and read about them in the chat-rooms and forums I visited on the Internet. My secret thought with a touch of playfulness was, "Like it's new."

The fact is that young urban Chinese women are likely to "discover" that they are women when they have to go through an abortion. Before they engage in a sexually involved love relationship, they have been competing fairly with boys in school, and have no competition for parental investment at home. Many of my urban informants said that they learned to be woman in university or in their first romantic love relationship. They have soon learned another lesson about women through their experiences of abortion. Sex cannot be a fair game when only women suffer the consequence. Aspirations for upward mobility both conditioned the women's consciousness of their bitter fate and strengthened their resolve to escape it.

The Value of this Study

The value of this study lies in its contribution to China studies, women studies, and the anthropological studies of human freedom and suffering.

This study doesn't treat abortion as an isolated issue, but a situation that reflects a series of conflicts and constraints that a woman faces in China today. I chose to study unmarried women to show that state regulations and family supervision are not only source of the constraints in women's lives. Believing in a social norm without recognizing its discriminating nature can also be a source of constraint. In this study, women had abortions for the goal of a happy and successful life; however, they fail to see the limitation in such a definition of happiness. This is also the limitation of some feminist studies, in which they measure the empowerment of women without discovering more forms of power other than the existing male defined ones.

Women's lives have always been marked by difference, tension, and division. The need to study them and to understand them motivate me to learn more about the existing situation and think critically about those we have so often taken for granted. By raising women's voices in this study, I deconstruct the dominant social assumptions about women's fantasy of an ideal life. By pointing out the conflict

between the discourse of romantic love and a double standard against women regarding sexual experience, I contend that the controversies in women's lives are not clear-cut issues. Women are not eager to embrace liberation if such liberation is lonely and without men's support. Women's unanimous choice to lie about their past abortions in this study supports my view. Furthermore, this study contributes to enriching the feminist worldview with the Chinese situated meaning and cultural background.

This study contributes to the anthropological studies of freedom and human suffering by asking more questions rather than offering solutions.

How do we interpret freedom? In this study I've met women who insisted not to use anesthesia to punish herself, who wrote heartbroken diaries "to educate all the other girls", who swore that she would spend the rest of her life to redeem her sin. They are the most likely to be free from any more abortions. I've also met women who claimed that the painless abortion "is just a nap", who still refuse to apply reliable contraceptive methods. I met a woman who had had five abortions but was not worried because she read about a magazine story about a woman who had ten abortions. These women seem to be free from the hurt feelings of having abortions. Most often, I met women who are simply trying to not think of it, who want to wipe it out. But the memory seems to have its own way of coming back. And in some cases, it's another unwanted pregnancy. I can't help wondering, is there only one definition of freedom? What are the other ways of interpreting it, by whom?

How do we interpret human suffering? In her study of health and family planning in a Vietnamese community, Tine Gammeltoft reminds us of the danger of interpreting suffering as resistance. It is dangerous because we "romanticize" suffering and thus distort the very feelings and experiences which we set out to understand (Gammeltoft 1999: 246). But what if the informant "romanticizes" her suffering herself? Where does her romanticization end and where does our romanticization begin? I look at my informants and I admire them from the bottom of my heart. I want to applaud them. Despite the traumatic experience, they get up and keep on walking in life. They convince me that interpreting human suffering is not more important than surviving it. Therefore, there is no reason for an observer to feel any sense of superiority over the survivor.

Finally, this research experience has made me, as a researcher, learn more about life. My friends say that my personality has changed after this project. I have

become much quieter than I was before. I guess somehow this project shut me up. At first I had difficulty in getting trust from people. The first question they liked to ask me was, "have you had abortion before?" When I said no, they would immediately say, "oh, then you can never understand." But from July, after three months of chatting with people, I found my new informants' responses started to change. They still asked me the same question, but when they learned I didn't have the experience, they would say, "Really? But you seem to understand me so much." I think I have just become humbler. I have learned to be humble to human suffering, to be humble to experiences that cannot be expressed in words, and to be humble to ordinary people fighting their life battles.

And although abortion suggests rejection and termination, I see gains and growth stem from it. I can never know what it feels like since I have not experienced an abortion myself. But from what I learned from my informants, I guess even if abortion is a traumatic experience, it's not much different than any other traumatic experiences we encounter in life. All that we do is to cope with it as well as we can. Hopefully, those that don't kill us, make us stronger.

Appendix

Informant list

Urban women with abortion experience						
NO.	Age	Educational level	Occupation	Number of abortions	Age at first abortion	Other
1	20	university	Student	3	16	only child
2	24	graduate school	Teacher	2	21	Parents divorced
3	25	university	office worker	1	24	only child
4	22	high school	None	1	22	Parents divorced
5	21	college (quit)	None	4	16	only child
6	21	college	self-employed	3	17	only child
7	17	high school	Student	1	16	only child
8	21	occupational high school	None	3	17	only child
9	21	university	Student	2	18	only child
10	19	university	Student	1	19	only child
11	24	occupational high school	restaurant worker	1	23	only child
12	22	high school	self-employed	2	21	
13	26	university	accountant	1	25	only child
14	25	graduate school	Student	1	23	
15	18	high school	None	1	18	only child
Other urban informants						
NO.	Age	Educational level	Occupation	Sexual experience	Unplanned pregnancy	Other
16	23	university	office worker	No	None	
17	20	university	Student	Yes	None	
18	23	university	office worker	Yes	None	
19	24	university	Teacher	n/a	None	
20	29	university	Teacher	Yes	None	Married
21	26	college	office worker	Yes	None	Married
22	16	high school	Student	No	None	
23	24	graduate school	Student	Yes		Male
24	25	graduate school	Student	Yes		Male
25	27	graduate school	Student	Yes		Male

Medical professionals						
NO.	Age	Educational level	Occupation	Sex		Other
26	28	university	doctor	M		
27	38	university	doctor	F		
28	26	university	doctor	F		
29	45	college	doctor	F		Dong-guan
30	40	college	doctor	F		Dong-guan
31	23	college	doctor	F		Dong-guan
Informants from Houjie, Dongguan						
NO.	Age	Educational level	Occupation	Marital status	Number of children	Other
32	20	middle school	unemployed	Yes, without marriage license	1	
33	22	middle school	unemployed	Yes, without marriage license	1	
34	19	elementary school	unemployed	Yes, without marriage license	0	Two mis-carriages
35	24	middle school	worker	Yes	2	
36	21	middle school	worker	Yes, without marriage license	1	
37	25	middle school	office worker	Yes	0	
38	22	middle school	worker	Yes, without marriage license	2	
39	24	high school	worker	Yes, without marriage license	0	Male
40	24	middle school	worker	Yes, without marriage license	2	Male
41	27	middle school	worker	Yes	1	Male
42	27	college	office worker	No, in a relationship	0	

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